

Tea with the Hatter (TGIF)

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Tea with the Hatter (TGIF)

by [theorytale](#)

Summary

It's seven a.m., Thursday fourteenth November, 2013.

It always is.

Six More Weeks of Winter

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"Good morning, sir. It's seven a.m., Thursday fourteenth. The weather in New York City is thirty-five degrees and clear, with an expected high of fifty-four."

It sure was. It always was.

"Hold all calls, cancel all reminders." Tony stared at the ceiling for three seconds then got out of bed. He brushed his teeth and got dressed. He went to the workshop.

Okay. Morning. Time to start again.

--

Being stuck in a time-loop was a lot more boring than movies made it seem.

In theory, the idea of being able to do anything you wanted with no consequences sounded like a lot of fun. When you were Tony Stark, however... you'd already *done* most of the things you wanted with no consequences. It turned out not to be particularly different to any other day that ended in -y.

But there were no new movies. No new jokes. No new proposals from R&D to review.

Tony had started a hundred, a thousand, probably hundreds of thousands of conversations and after long enough (*a single day, again and again and again and...*) they all repeated each other.

There was one day, and only so many different ways he could spend it.

--

During one version, Tony decided he kind of missed the taste of... something. Having tried all the food he could think of, he didn't usually bother to eat anymore unless he just missed tasting things. His body never got around to hunger pangs.

"Time," he said.

"The time is ten forty-six a.m., sir."

That meant the path was clear. No one was in the lounge and the kitchen between 9:14 and 11:37 unless Tony himself did something to alter the course of the day. He put down his lightpen and went upstairs.

Only, when he stepped into the kitchen, it wasn't empty.

Tony cocked his head, surprised for the first time in... a long time. Thor was still in the kitchen. Thor left the kitchen at 9:14. Thor hadn't left the kitchen. What was even *more* surprising was that Thor was hugging some guy dressed like a cartoon villain. Actually, it was all the black leather that stirred Tony's memory. Long ago, before this one repeating day, when he'd first met aliens and Captain America, and nearly died in outer space.

What was the wicked stepsister called?

Loki, right. Loki... was new.

Thor didn't change. Thor didn't ever change, acting out the same day over and over and over again. So the change could only mean that Loki...

Loki... had changed it?

Fortunately Tony's body could operate on autopilot. "So..." he drawled, wagging his eyebrows, "can anyone get in on this action?"

Thor and Loki startled apart; Thor looked like he was about to offer an explanation, but Loki scowled and flung his hand out.

Something thumped against Tony's chest. He stared down in shock at the knife protruding from his chest.

And then he died.

--

There were a few things Tony had found to try out, once he came to terms with the fact that he was actually in a genuine time-loop. The sensation of getting tattooed (hello, endorphin rush), no lasting marks to regret. That was a good one. Sex with men was another one, no worries about anyone deciding to 'go public'. He'd managed to assassinate the leader of every single UN member state, plus the Pope. Cheesy pranks using foreknowledge of people's actions, that was just obvious.

In one version he'd taken the opportunity to tell all the most important people in his life how much he appreciated them. Unfortunately, that had meant the rest of a day with Pepper afraid he was dying again. In retrospect, he could have planned that out better, but it got the urge out of his system.

Another version, he'd set up a game of minigolf on the deck of the SHIELD helicarrier. It had seemed... wait. *Had* that been another version? Or had it been... before? Back in 'real time'.

He wasn't entirely sure.

Yeah. So. He'd already tried most of the things in life that he was interested in trying. Visited the places he wanted to go. Eventually, the only thing he could *really* do was sequester himself in his workshop and attempt to completely revolutionize modern science until he uncovered a way to stop this bullshit.

--

Loki throwing the knife at him wasn't the first time Tony had died. It was unsettling; left his mind panicked and shocky, left his body feeling profoundly *wrong* for the first few hours of the next version of the morning.

Needless to say, in the next version, Tony did not decide to go looking for food. Let the god wannabes have their little family reunion uninterrupted. He recreated his time machine concept diagram (again, and again, and again...) and began laboriously poking at the equations, trying to make something work.

Maybe he needed a different tack. He'd discarded a few dead ends already. This one had seemed like it really had potential. He could drop into CERN again to argue about the Wheeler-Feynman absorber theory with John Cramer...

It was... already four in the afternoon there. More like five if he showered and shaved before suiting up and he just really didn't *want* to go around in circles on the theory again, theory was driving him up the wall, Tony was an *engineer*. He liked to get his hands dirty.

It probably wouldn't help. If this was something to do with Loki, then sensible, reliable *science* might not have much to do with it.

If he could just figure out how to solve the radiation feedback loop, he'd be *so close*; he just had to find a way to balance the equations, make the mathematics *sing*...

Deep in his thoughts and expecting to be alone in the workshop, it took Tony several moments to register the silky, promising voice from behind him.

"Tony Stark, I've come to offer you a great boon."

Different again. Nobody came to the workshop today. Loki was in his workshop. The newness made his nerves tingle with uncertainty, made his blood thrum. It was different, someone was doing something different, and *Tony hadn't prompted it*.

He turned around and looked Loki up and down. "Mm. Helmet of Overcompensation and everything. Should I be flattered?"

Loki's eyebrow twitched, but he rolled with it and gave a magnanimous smile. "As it happens, you should. I bring you untold knowledge, for the likes of which many men would sell their souls."

"Is that right," Tony said thoughtfully. He hoped it came across as thoughtful, instead of coming across as, say, a crazy person who was all giddy over having a conversation that actually seemed *new*. "And here I was, thinking you were trapped in a repeating twenty-four hour time-loop and you'd come to beg for my help."

Loki gaped at him for a moment, and it was so beautiful that Tony was genuinely sorry the footage wouldn't exist past the end of this iteration. The memory would have to be enough. And speaking of memory, he could tell the exact moment when Loki figured out that Tony was stuck in the time-loop too (brows furrowing slightly with puzzlement) and that by extension, Tony remembered seeing him *hugging Thor* (eyes flaring wide with mortified horror).

Tony smiled brightly.

Loki, predictably, fell back on his default position: angry threats. "If you dare breathe a word--" he hissed.

"Whoa, whoa." Tony rapidly motioned 'stop' with his hands. "What happened to 'O Great and Magnificent Stark, I bring you the gift of please-help-me'? You know, that's your problem, Loki; you don't *commit*."

"Is this *commitment* enough," Loki snarled, stalking towards him - and if there was an end to that sentence Tony never heard it past the sound of his neck being snapped.

--

"Good morning, sir. It's seven a.m., Thursday fourteenth..."

Tony jolted awake with his heart running scattershot in his chest. He stared up at his own wide eyes, reflected back from the mirror on the ceiling. When he tilted his head, he half-expected fingerprint bruises on his neck.

Twice in a row. "Rude," he said out loud.

"Sir?"

"Rhetorical, Jarvis." Tony rubbed his knuckles against his sternum where the arc reactor had lodged, once upon a time. He was annoyed now. Not that death was a big setback at the moment, but it *hurt*, and it was morning again and he'd have to redraw his schematics and that was just tedious, he was never going to make any progress if this kept on and he couldn't make his stupid heart stop *racing*--

He tipped his head back and gave a wordless yell of frustration.

"One of those mornings, I see," Jarvis said knowingly, because that was what Jarvis always said now when Tony woke up howling with helplessness and rage. Someone a long time ago (who had actually been in a position to *see* Tony in the morning, before he buried himself in a machine) must have made a joke, and Jarvis had learned it, because that was what Jarvis did, Jarvis learned, except Jarvis didn't learn anymore because the day *kept starting again* and so everybody said the *same damn thing* over and over and over again.

"I'm thinking about selling up and becoming a llama farmer," Tony said. He took a moment, pulled himself together. Rolled out of bed with a slightly disgruntled noise. That dick in leather was probably going to come back and be--

new

--a murderous pain in the ass again. Well, fine. He was hardly the first murderous bondage freak Tony had dealt with.

"Jarvis," he said, heading into the walk-in to pick an appropriate suit for the occasion. "Archived weapon designs. Machinable on-site. Intended target non-human 'Loki'." The charcoal Brioni? He did look superb in it, but he felt like something... lighter.

*new, different, **change***

"There are twelve designs on file matching those criteria," Jarvis said pleasantly. "Shall I display them in descending order of estimated lethality?"

"You know me so well," Tony hummed. He spotted one of his old favorites and perked up, pulling it from the rack. Yes, the baby blue would do nicely.

--

Three hours further through this version, he had already used the suit jacket as a cleaning rag and discarded it in a corner; his shirt-sleeves were shoved back to his elbows and he was liberally streaked with oil. He was cradling the bastard child of a Taser and a spear-gun, humming along to a bit of classic Joan Jett.

There was a flicker of green and gold in the corner of his eye. Tony glanced over, raising an eyebrow.

"I believe," Loki enunciated, hands clasped primly in front of himself, "we may have gotten off on the wrong foot."

"You don't say." Tony eyeballed the distance between them and strolled a couple of steps closer. "And what foot is that, exactly?"

Loki made a show of looking down at the weapon in Tony's hand and giving a condescending smile. It was the sort of smile that said 'it's cute that you think that might hurt me'. It was a very familiar smile. Childhood, maybe? Tony barely remembered those years anymore, but he definitely recognized the feeling of being underestimated. And the knowledge that he was about to blow some smirking idiot out of the water.

"Mister Stark. Tony." Loki practically purred his name, gliding shark-like across the floor to actually *drape an arm around his shoulders*. "I find it... interesting that in all the Realms, you and I alone remain aware of this little... *snag*. In the course of time."

Tony stopped staring down at the hand on his shoulder and turned his head to scowl at Loki's face. "'Interesting', you find that interesting. You know what I would find interesting? Friday. A Friday would be deeply interesting to me, but unfortunately somebody around here *broke time*."

Loki looked briefly defensive and cranky, but his face quickly smoothed back into that patronizing smile. "Fortune may yet smile upon you, friend. It seems that you and I have been chosen to restore the natural--"

Bored, Tony jammed his spear-pistol into Loki's ribs and fired. Loki made a very short choking sound; his arm fell away from Tony's shoulders, then he collapsed to the floor.

Hmm. The dart hadn't gone all the way through; a couple of inches of polarized adamantium blade protruded from Loki's chest, little blue sparks crackling between the open barbs. Asgardian flesh was even denser than Tony had realized. That wasn't a big deal; there was still room to increase the initial force of the dart's launch. The basic principle seemed to work.

"That," he said darkly, nudging Loki's body with the toe of his shoe, "is for throwing a knife at me, you over-sensitive shitbag."

He paused for a moment, then decided that seemed like it would be satisfying, and kicked the body again much harder. "That's for breaking my neck." Kick. "And that's for breaking *time*, you stupid, selfish-- fucking ruined--"

His chest seized up and he was gasping despite himself. Breaking time. *Loki*. Loki broke time. All of this, the never-ending limbo, repeating over and over, *definition of insanity*, trapped in an endless haze of the same morning weather report for eternity and it was *this guy's fault*.

Which meant it wasn't Tony's.

He sucked in a shuddering breath, collapsing to sit on the hard floor of the lab. His eyes burned, watering fiercely. This wasn't-- he hadn't done this. He hadn't finally destroyed the fabric of the universe in some monumental fuck-up to end all other fuck-ups. It wasn't some cosmic punishment for his many and varied sins. He might not even be crazy. (He was probably still a bit crazy.)

Loki had done this.

Tony tried to suck in another breath and it lodged in his throat. He pulled his knees up tight; managed a strangled sob and a half-gasp. He hadn't-- Loki-- *Loki*, something new and independent and *Loki did this* and Tony covered his mouth with his hands and sobbed and sobbed, tears streaming down his face in anger and fear and overwhelming relief.

--

There were a few versions that Tony was especially fond of. Sometimes he'd re-enact them, like replaying episodes of a TV show. Drop into R&D and nudge Pete Marasigan into that

breakthrough on adamantium nano-structures, then ride the wave of excitement and triumph that spread across the whole floor. Steer the conversation to set up Krupin's perfect smackdown of the microchips released by Barstow Electronics. Drop into Pepper's office with a ridiculous frappuccino just at 9:58 as she got off a call that had already put her in a good mood, and watch that soft, beautiful smile take over her face. Replay everything warm and familiar and cozy, and wrap himself up in it.

That wasn't weird. Everyone had favorite episodes. Tony's just involved more audience participation than most.

--

Tony was used to choosing what version he'd live through. He was on the catering floor chatting to some employees on their breaks, and he knew what the possible outcomes were depending on what he said and what time he said it. None of those outcomes included a security guard getting physically tossed against the table and an absurdly strong hand gripping his shoulder to force him around.

"Oh, right," Tony said, looking up at Loki's furious expression. Loki remembered things too. That meant Loki was probably mad about getting killed. Tony probably should have expected that. "I probably should have expected this."

"You impudent *worm*," Loki snarled at him.

A couple of people tried to wrestle Loki away, apparently not quite realizing what the leather outfit meant. Loki smacked them aside easily, and once the super strength was apparent they started getting sensible enough to scramble backwards instead. The security guard - Karl Verner, Tony noted - was bleeding from the head and not moving, so this was going to be a sad version with people dying.

Did that mean avoid coming to the catering floor between ten and eleven to prevent it? Or did Loki's attack on Karl happen whether Tony was on this floor or not? Maybe he needed to seek out Loki earlier in the morning to divert-- Except Loki should be upstairs hugging Thor, Tony hadn't done anything to interfere with that stream of events, so--

Loki had already hugged Thor, Loki wasn't stuck on repeat, this was... this was a one-off? This was... really confusing. Tony frowned, irritated with his own struggle to catch on. Maybe if he thought of it as just one longer version, that had internal continuity for Loki, and then all the other people had shorter repeat cycles within the over-arching one?

Loki grabbed the lapels of Tony's jacket and hauled him forward and up some. "Listen well, Midgardian. I'm prepared to overlook your transgression - *this time* - but do not think my generosity is limitless. You will *not* strike me again--"

"Or what?" Tony shot back. This was kind of entertaining, at least. He liked new stuff, and he was pretty sure he remembered that Loki was one hell of a performer.

Someone had triggered the evacuation alarm. Neither of them bothered to acknowledge it. The situation would only exist for a matter of hours, then another version would take its place.

"You will show respect, mortal, or I will *teach* it to you." Loki's voice went impressively low, filled with sinister promise. Very dramatic.

Tony started to mentally file away the actions that had led to this interaction, so he could re-enact

this version if he was in the mood, and then he forcefully reminded himself that Loki was-- different. Part of a much longer version? Global variable, referentially opaque function, it depended on how Tony conceptualized the whole... thing.

"The phrase 'lead by example' springs to mind right about now," he said out loud.

Loki let go of him with a bit of a shove, back into the cafeteria chair. "We have more important concerns to deal with--"

"Funny you should mention that." Tony re-adjusted his jacket and settled more comfortably into the chair. "Now, why don't you start by telling me what the hell you did to time?"

"Why do you assume it's something *I* did?" Loki said, a little petulantly.

Tony rolled his eyes. "Huh, I wonder if it could be because I've *met you*. And because you seem to be the only other person who doesn't reset every morning."

Loki eyed him for a moment, cool and calculating, then said, "What else do you know?"

"Uh, let's see." Tony ticked them off on thumb and fingers as he spoke. "I know you fucked up some unnatural hocus-pocus, and kick-started Groundhog Day. I know you've failed to fix it on your own. I know you couldn't resist the opportunity to make nice with your brother knowing that he won't remember it--"

Loki's mouth twisted in a silent snarl.

"--and I know that you came to me because even though you can't stand me, I'm still the smartest person you know." That left one finger. Dammit, if he'd ticked them off in a different order, he could have finished up by smugly flipping Loki the bird. Okay, next time r--

No. There wasn't going to be a 'next time round' of this conversation. It would only happen once, and then Loki would remember it, and they'd... have new, different conversations.

Oh, this was *so weird*.

Loki lifted his chin, haughty and scornful. The evacuation alarm was still going in the background. "So you've discovered nothing."

"Well, if you count formulating a new theory of the universe as *nothing*, then sure."

Loki's expression suggested he did, in fact, count that as 'nothing'.

The wide stairwell door burst open, then - definite overuse of force, the frame visibly splintered - and Thor stood there brandishing Mjolnir. "Loki! I did not want to believe what I heard--"

"Yes, I know." Loki stepped back from Tony, looking strangely... tired. "It was no illusion, I was only barely alive, I'm not here to attack, have I missed anything?"

"Normally, where there is no attack, one does not find bodies," Thor said grimly, and started to slowly approach.

Right. Tony looked at Karl's body and grimaced. "I suppose it doesn't help if I say he's going to be fine in the morning?"

Loki glanced at him in mild surprise and amusement, eyebrow quirked. Thor... seemed less amused.

"If you are not in my brother's thrall, Tony Stark, I suggest you call your suit of armor to you."

Loki sighed. "Thor, I love you, but your tendency to solve everything with your fists is just as unnecessary as ever."

Thor stopped, looking taken aback at Loki's straightforward tone. Tony made a face. It seemed that, earlier threats aside, Loki had done some work on that... giant mess of issues. That was kind of unfair. All Tony had done was develop new ones.

"Why do I feel like you've used your time more productively than I have," he muttered.

The elevator doors opened and Rogers and Barton emerged, shield and bow at the ready, respectively. Tony made a sound of disgust and slumped against the back of his chair. There was no way this wasn't going to escalate, now.

"You know," Loki said conversationally, "it occurs to me that spending a few hours relaxing in a hot spring is a much simpler course of action."

"Probably, but you kind of ruled that out when you--" Tony stopped short, staring at the spot where Loki had *fucking vanished*. "What the *hell*? Hey!" Dammit, the asshole had left him here to deal with the aftermath, that was *cheating*.

"Tony, are you alright?" Steve hurried over to him, while Clint started demanding answers from Thor about Loki being pretty obviously *not dead*.

"Yeah, I'm fine." Tony was struck by an excellent idea. He looked over at Thor. "The guy said he'd been in some sort of time-loop? Hypothetically, if that's even true, do you know anything that could cause that?"

He'd asked Thor before, of course, but sometimes getting the desired results was just down to context and which ideas were closer to the top of someone's mind at the time. With Loki's magic more prominent for Thor...

"I have heard it said that attempting to influence time is among the most dangerous of magics," Thor said, frowning. "I wish I could tell you with confidence that Loki knows better. I do not know him as I thought I did."

"So Loki might have meddled with time?" Tony said, more eagerly than he'd intended. It was still almost overwhelming, the idea that it *wasn't his fault*, that Loki made this happen. "What does that mean, can he undo it?"

"Stark," Clint said, eyeing him strangely - whoops. Tony should be paying attention, playing this better.

Before Clint could continue, though, Steve said, "He's got a pulse!" and Tony turned to see Steve moving Karl's body into the recovery position or whatever it was called these days and okay, right, playing this better, Tony Stark would react to the news that his employee was still alive.

Rushing to arrange medical treatment only bought so much time. There was a debriefing as soon as the SHIELD part of the group could pull him away, and it was obvious that they all thought he was under some sort of insidious Loki-related influence. He didn't bother to put a lot of effort into convincing them otherwise; it was only for a few hours after all. The most annoying thing about their concern was that they made it really difficult for him to get more answers from Thor about this time magic stuff.

--

"Good morning, sir. It's seven a.m., Thursday fourteenth. The weather in New York City is thirty-five degrees and clear, with an expected high of fifty-four."

"Hold all calls, cancel all reminders." Tony stretched under the covers and remembered that there might be *new*. Loki, the random variable, who remembered other versions and had a penchant for leather and dramatics. New conversations, new ideas. Tony grinned helplessly. It was exhilarating. Energizing.

He was definitely going to masturbate.

It felt so good to wake up in a good mood. Who wouldn't celebrate that? Tony luxuriated for a while with the aid of some sensitizing lube and a very well-shaped toy, and lost himself in feelings of pleasure and potential until climax overwhelmed him.

For a while he lay there panting, then he laughed breathlessly and got to his feet. Clean up, then workshop, and see if Loki happened. Just happened, independent of any actions or prompting on Tony's part. Change. Wasn't Loki supposedly a god of that, in the stories? Chaos and unpredictable stuff. *New*.

He hummed to himself in the shower, playing with the suds. Some long-buried memory stirred enough for him to slick up a shampoo mohawk. New stuff was happening and there was a strong possibility that this whole thing wasn't Tony's fault. It was a *beautiful* version of the day.

He wasn't sure how long he took in the shower, but when he came out of the bathroom toweling his hair, Loki was lounging on his bed, in full horns-and-cape ensemble. On top of the covers, thankfully. Tony paused and wrapped the towel around his waist with as much dignity as he could muster. His heart thrummed with the unfamiliar; this was *new*, this had *never happened before*.

"Sorry," he said, mask of politeness to cover the giddiness in his throat, "house rule. No mass-murdering psychopaths in the bedrooms. You'll have to wait outside."

Loki dragged his eyes up Tony's body, slow and languorous. It was one hell of a once-over. Tony had had less thorough inspections from proctologists.

Finally Loki raised his eyebrows and answered as if no time had passed. "I count at least three."

Tony refused to ask which of them Loki was counting. Instead he waited, gaze steadier than he felt, until Loki finally stretched and - catlike, giving off the impression that he was doing this because he happened to feel like it, and certainly not because some lowly mortal commanded it - rose to stroll out of the room. Despite himself, Tony was impressed; Loki sure knew how to play a role.

Clothes... clothes was a good question. The prospect of facing Loki made him feel like he should wear something extremely expensive, boardroom or high society armor, but his buoyant mood called for something comfortable that would boost his smile. In the end he opted for the latter, with a tee shirt from some vacation he didn't remember and a battered pair of old jeans.

When he headed upstairs into the lounge, Loki cast a lingering glance at the clothes and made a tsk of disappointment. "Shame."

Tony snorted lightly and turned on a coffee machine. "If you think a little light innuendo is going to unnerve me then you clearly don't know very much about me."

"My mistake," Loki said amiably. "Did you have a pleasant orgasm?"

Tony shot him an incredulous look. "I said *light* innuendo, who the hell asks-- yes, it was great, it was an orgasm, of course it was pleasant." He shook his head and re-focused. "Let's go back to the part where you *broke time*."

Loki's polite mask dropped and he glared at Tony. "Tread carefully, mortal."

"Yeah, yeah. You kill me, I kill you, it's all very aggressive." Tony gestured as though he could wave that part of the conversation aside. Pointless posturing. "I didn't get much out of Thor but he said trying to mess with time is considered pretty dangerous stuff. Is this why? Is this some magic-gone-horribly-wrong, you-should-not-meddle-with-things-beyond-your-ken kind of B.S.?"

"Something like that," Loki said, to Tony's surprise. Tony had been expecting more defensiveness and threats.

He didn't remember Loki well enough to have a solid read on... before. Assuming there *was* a 'before' and that life wasn't just a series of versions of the same day. Sometimes he wondered if the patchy memories he had of longer timespans, of people who learned and changed, were just constructs of his own mind.

Assuming 'before' was a real time-state that had existed, Loki seemed... different from that. Then again, Tony supposed he was probably pretty different, himself.

"So what do we do?" he asked. "I'm assuming if it was straight-forward and easy you'd have done it by now. Or not, just to be a dick, I don't know."

Loki narrowed his eyes with a cold, quelling expression. "That is the question. Of the thousand greatest minds among the Nine Realms, I have consulted them all."

Tony snorted, folding his arms. "And how'd that work out for you?"

"Which is why I am considering... *not* the greatest minds among the Nine Realms." Loki sighed, and a gold light washed over him; the cloak and helmet disappeared, and the BDSM leather shifted into the more casual version he'd worn when hugging Thor. "I don't expect you to understand the complexities of time's gyre, but Midgardians have strange ways of looking at things and perhaps... perhaps some notion you have will give me an idea."

Wow. That was possibly the worst pitch Tony'd heard since... okay, he didn't really remember the pitch for joining the Avengers, but he knew it had been some bullshit reverse-psychology thing. "Could you sound any *more* defeated? I get that last time you were on this planet your ass got handed to you, but--"

Loki grimaced briefly. "Ah, yes. I suppose I should... apologize, for that."

Tony stared at him, aware of an old, cold anger stirring in his veins. "You want to apologize." For *invading the planet*.

"In my defense," Loki said, in the driest tone Tony had ever heard, "I was having a *very* bad day."

Tony had tried out a lot of things, in different versions of today. Abruptly he remembered that there had been a bunch of versions during which he'd spent time thinking about the invasion - that dead end foray into Tesseract notes, that was it - and how there was another thing he'd wanted to try that had been out of his reach, in those versions.

But not out of reach in this one.

He smiled brightly and took the few short steps to punch Loki in the face.

--

"Good morning, sir. It's seven a.m., Thursday fourteenth. The weather in New York City is thirty-five degrees and clear, with an expected high of fifty-four."

Tony grimaced, heart racing with the unsettled feeling of freshly dying. "I guess that was kind of predictable," he admitted to himself.

"It does normally follow Wednesday, sir."

Tony snorted, pushing himself upright, and swung his legs over the side of the bed. "Don't worry, Jarvis," he said, a little hollowly. "Just a dream." He stared at his knees for a moment. His body felt wrong. He hated the aftermath of dying. "Hold all calls, cancel all reminders."

Morning. Again. He should go to the workshop, get started...

Fuck it. He didn't have to put up with this shit. Tony got up and strode into his walk-in wardrobe. "Jarvis, archived weapon designs, machinable on-site, intended target non-human 'Loki'. Descending order of estimated lethality."

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"Good morning, sir. It's seven a.m., Thursday fourteenth. The weather in New York City is thirty-five degrees and clear, with an expected high of fifty-four."

Tony inhaled and exhaled, not liking the shakiness of his breath. That had been... unpleasant. "Jarvis, archived weapon designs, the Jester. Scrap it. Theory didn't stack up."

"Design deleted, sir. Did you wish for a secure erase?"

"Nah." Tony got up, cursing his hands for trembling and his heart for pounding. "These things have a way of coming back." He ran his fingers through his hair shortly and frowned at the window. Loki needed to learn a damn lesson. "Hold all calls, cancel all reminders. Pull up GLINDA, start production."

"Are we expecting a significant threat, sir?"

Tony gave a grim smile at Jarvis' concern. "You could say that. Daddy's going to take care of it."

He dressed in black with a white shirt, crisp lines and tailored fabric. Put gel in his hair and sunglasses on. Rolex Cosmograph Daytona in steel and yellow gold. The blood-red rhodolite cufflinks he'd got from Obie for his 25th. Open collar, no tie. A smile that could cut diamonds.

There were terms and conditions to hiring Tony Stark and one of those was to *stop fucking killing him*.

Loki might be an alien with a ridiculously durable body and some fancy stage magic, but Tony had been a CEO in one of the most cut-throat industries on the planet. Almost literally, in his case. He was Iron Man. Loki was going to learn what that meant.

He made himself a coffee - strong, no sweetener, something dark and bitter to start the day - and took it to the workshop to oversee the machining. A couple of points in the process needed extra authorization codes and he whistled softly as he plugged them in. He didn't remember what tune he

was whistling. He didn't bother to ask Jarvis to identify it.

GLINDA had a massive power draw, but the Tower ran off an arc reactor that was more than enough to cope. Knowing that Loki would come to him made it a whole lot easier. He could distribute the network points evenly around the workshop and wire them directly into the electricity system.

He was just finishing the sixth anchor when he heard Loki's sneer from behind him. "And just what is *that* tiny thing supposed to be?"

Tony straightened up and adjusted his cuffs as he turned around. He'd taken the sunglasses off to do the wiring, which was a shame, but he spread his hands anyway and gave a showman's smile. "Gamma-limited inversion net, dynamic amplitude. Allow me to demonstrate. Jarvis?"

"Activating inversion net, sir," Jarvis said crisply.

This was going to be really embarrassing if it failed as badly as the Jester had, but the bubble that formed around Loki looked pretty much as Tony had anticipated. The air twisted inside it. Loki turned blue, which Tony had *not* expected, then fell to his knees, clutching at his chest.

"Ramp up the power," Tony said, sliding his hands into his pockets.

Jarvis hesitated. "Sir, further power draw will interfere with Tower functions--"

It was taking that much already? Tony raised an eyebrow. That suggested the output hadn't optimized. This needed work. "Do it. Override any necessary failsafes, authorization helios-quatre-garçon-India-neutrino."

The lights flickered and GLINDA started to generate an audible hum. Loki collapsed, some nasty yellow-green liquid leaking from his ears and nose. Ugh, it was getting on Tony's *floor*. He shuddered. "That's gotta be unhygienic."

"Insufficient information to determine, sir," Jarvis said apologetically.

Tony shrugged, and turned away from Loki's corpse and the GLINDA bubble. "Pull up the power draw, map it to amplitude. I wanna see what's going on here."

Jarvis obligingly displayed the relevant charts, and Tony lost himself in science.

--

Loki, obviously, did not take it well.

--

A series of versions with ever-escalating levels of violence led to Tony, encased in a charred and battered Iron Man suit, leaning heavily against the rubble of the Chrysler building. Loki dragged himself to his feet, breathing hard and occasionally wincing.

"So," Tony said, not entirely sure his suit was functioning well enough to generate a repulsor blast. Around them were miles of shattered concrete and warped metal, the wreckage and debris of most of Manhattan and a smidge of the Bronx.

Loki grimaced, clutching his side. "Truce?"

Tony closed his eyes wearily. "Truce," he agreed, with a sense of relief.

--

They agreed to make a fresh start of it in the morning - or, 'agreed' was a strong word for it; Loki proclaimed it then left, neatly preventing any argument. At the start of the next version Tony had to admit that he did feel in a much better state to deal with quantum theory and the mechanics of time.

"Cancel all reminders, hold all calls," he told Jarvis, then got dressed and thought about how to occupy himself until Loki arrived. Mostly by reviewing Mallett's work on simulating black holes with ring lasers. Closer to the time Loki was likely to arrive, he started making pancakes, figuring he may as well be hospitable for the hell of it.

It turned out Loki really liked pancakes. Tony grinned a little as Loki tried to speak around a mouthful of fluffiness and syrup.

"If ou re'ain mem'weh--"

"Swallow, then talk," Tony advised, before helping himself to another forkful. They were good pancakes, he admitted to himself. He was a lot better at cooking when... when...?

A flicker of something, not quite a memory. Something about cooking under stress not turning out well. He shrugged it off.

Loki rolled his eyes, but obediently chewed and swallowed. "If you retain memories of cycles past, you must have had some involvement in whatever happened, deliberate or not." He cut and stacked several pieces with a precision that was oddly soothing. "What were you doing before the cycles collapsed?"

Tony frowned, sliding a piece of pancake around in the syrup on his plate. "I... think I... something to do with the building's arc reactor? I couldn't figure out how that would affect time, I kind of gave it up as a dead end."

Loki didn't answer right away, occupied with pancakes. After he swallowed, he said, "I should examine it."

"Sure, I'll take you down there. We don't want to still be in here at 11:37. Steve and Natasha show up to make some lunch." Tony stared into the air absently, thinking about what Loki had said. "You have a theory about how all this works. Explain the thing about collapsing cycles."

"It's hardly a theory." Loki speared some pancake from Tony's plate and ate it with a smug smirk, making Tony wait. Finally he continued, "Time is circular. There is chaos, the birth of all; events unfold; then Ragnarok and rebirth. In each cycle, events may vary somewhat, but the basic components are the same. The cycle should span billions of years, but somehow it has collapsed down to a single day."

"Oscillating universe model," Tony translated. "Sorry, but entropy begs to differ. We've measured this stuff - unless something *really* unexpected happens with dark energy," which, okay, apparently it may have, "all indications are we're heading for a Big Freeze, not a Crunch. Particles become increasingly entangled, information becomes increasingly diffuse - time's not going to just *start over*."

Loki gave him a look that spoke volumes. Time *did* just 'start over'. Regularly.

"It doesn't make any sense," Tony muttered, crossing his arms with a scowl, but he thought about string theory and pointless non-predictive models and yeah, people had made a case for an infinitely cycling four-dimensional subspace - but not scaled down to just one *day*. "So why are we

remembering?"

"We stand outside the cycle." Loki dropped his gaze. "I wanted to step outside of time so I could re-enter at an earlier point and... alter things. It did not go as I'd hoped."

"You don't say," said Tony, glaring at him.

Loki shrugged one shoulder, looking kind of sad and resigned. "I made a mistake. The culmination of a series of particularly poor mistakes. I assure you, whatever you might wish to say to me, I have had more than enough time to say to myself."

Tony glared at him a bit longer, but something rang true about that claim - that Loki had already said it all to himself, and then some. Also, picking a fight would probably land them right back at the whole repeatedly-killing-each-other thing, which was tiring and unpleasant.

"Fine," he said tersely. "So if we're outside this 'cycle', explain why our bodies reset."

"The basic components are the same," Loki repeated. "Our presence, in the forms we wake in, is part of the universe. When I say we stand outside, I mean... our consciousness, our awareness of cycles past. Think of it as if we travel *with* the universe, rather than within it."

Tony threw his hands up in exasperation. "That doesn't make any sense! You're saying the only part of our bodies that doesn't reset is the hippocampus. Assuming you even have a hippocampus, wherever you store memory, I don't care. Every version I have the same physical body but memory accumulates, that's not sustainable, the hippocampus would deteriorate-- Maybe other parts of the brain don't reset either, I don't know. I figured I'd be more depressed if my brain chemistry was accumulating changes but apparently I'm more crazy than you now, which is just... wrong. On so many levels."

"Don't be so hard on yourself," Loki said mildly. "I doubt Midgardian minds are optimized to experience the same timespans as Asgardian and Jotun."

Tony opened his mouth, then closed it again. He stared at Loki a moment longer, then said, "I genuinely can't tell if you were being nice or that was a really passive aggressive insult."

Loki grinned and put another forkful of pancake in his mouth.

--

Down at the arc reactor Loki paced around it, studying it intently. He looked even more dramatic in the artificial light of its glow.

Tony was leaning back against the wall beside the door, arms folded and only half-watching as he contemplated Loki's firm belief that time was cyclical. The abbreviated timespan was the real sticking point. The start and end couldn't be what they were, how would a universe be so complex at its beginning, what was special about the state at which the system reverted? End point could be down to false vacuum collapse but then why the recursion? Something was missing.

"You're right," Loki said, staring at the arc reactor. "I have no idea how this machine could affect the cycles of time."

What? No... no, that wasn't fair. Tony looked at him with a silent protest lodged in his throat.

Loki couldn't just show up, all black leather and black hair and taste for theatrics, and offer all the things Tony wanted to hear - that someone understood how time worked, that this limbo had a

cause, that it *wasn't Tony's fault* - Loki couldn't just show up and *say* all that and then not be able to *fix it*!

He was finally getting the hang of thinking of Loki as different to everything else; remembering that Loki did more than just... react to player input, so to speak. Loki was supposed to be *change*, supposed to introduce unpredictable irregularities and referential opacity...

Tony hadn't realized how much he'd pinned his hopes on Loki, so quickly. He hadn't realized he'd *had* so much hope.

Loki raised a hand to the arc reactor, saying without glancing over, "I'm going to try something."

Tony didn't respond, still feeling stunned. He didn't know what else to do.

He saw the golden light start from Loki's palm, then start to seep into the reactor. The familiar background hum took on a higher pitch and Tony straightened in alarm. There was a brilliant flash before he could move, and a roar--

--

"Good morning, sir. It's seven a.m., Thursday fourteenth. The weather in New York City is thirty-five degrees and clear, with an expected high of fifty-four."

Tony jerked, almost throwing his arms up defensively. His pulse was hammering. He took some time to catch his breath, in out, in out, too fast, slow down, and oh god Loki had blown them both up. He stifled a half-hysterical laugh in the bedcovers.

Eventually, Tony dragged himself out of bed. He remembered to block any calls and cancel his calendar reminders, then dressed in a dull gray suit with a deep, dark red shirt. Black leather belt, just slightly textured, not too narrow. Cashmere blend socks and a pair of Balmain derby boots polished to perfection. Finally, the Rolex Milgauss, snug and solid around his wrist.

Step by step, he put himself together, ready to face the day. The only day there was, anymore.

He went to the workshop and scoured through journals online, staring at models of cosmology until the words all blurred together, meaningless.

At some point during that version there was a low rumble and the building swayed unpleasantly. The lights dimmed, then failed, along with all the screens in the workshop.

Tony gave an irritated huff. 'New' was losing a little of its charm. "You couldn't just let me work uninterrupted?" he muttered.

After a few more seconds, the power came back on. Jarvis re-synchronized and apologized and gave him an urgent security warning about someone tampering with the Tower's arc reactor.

"Yeah," Tony sighed, stretching his shoulders, "I noticed. Don't worry about it."

"But sir--"

Tony reeled off an override code and tried to remember the author of the article he'd been in the middle of skimming. Or at least one of the authors. Or its title. Dammit.

Cyclic model of the universe. It didn't have to be string theory, he supposed; there were other cyclic models. They weren't as tidy, too many things that didn't fit, but then again that was why he

disliked string theory to begin with. Anything could be made to fit. There were so many similar potential vacuum states that it was essentially meaningless as a predictive model. Tony was an *engineer*, for fuck's sake. The point of physics was to be able to *use* it.

He was still glaring at a blank screen when he heard the elevator door open behind him. He wasn't playing out a version that would prompt anyone to come here. It was Mister Extra Variable himself, and Tony still felt the flutter of *change* and *new* in his chest despite his resentment.

"Nice," he said out loud, without turning around. "You didn't blow us up this time."

"I hardly think you have cause to complain, considering that you appeared to die fairly instantly," Loki said sourly.

Huh. Tony grinned darkly at the implication, then swung his chair to face Loki. "So did you learn what you needed?"

"Perhaps." Loki paced a wide curve across the workshop, dark coat swirling around his legs. "It raises questions. Your involvement... complicates things."

It sounded like Loki was accusing him of making it worse, and Tony bristled defensively. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Loki stopped walking and fixed him with a steely glare. "It means the situation is more complex than I had originally thought, and you should *watch your tone*."

All Tony was hearing was 'worse', not 'better', and it was the opposite of what he wanted. What was the point of Loki even showing up, just to piss all over everything and say it was too hard? "You were meant to *fix this*," Tony accused, and he didn't care if he was being rational or not, nothing about any of this was rational.

"A task which is *in progress* and is not aided by your tantrum," Loki snapped, then narrowed his eyes. "I am not the Loki you once met or the one Thor may have spoken of. I am no longer willing to offer assistance which is only scorned and derided. We may have a truce, Midgardian, but you will treat me with respect--"

"Or you'll teach it to me?" Tony sneered, finishing the line from a previous version. He was more than willing to go toe to toe with Loki if he needed to and he'd show that-- *had* shown that, Loki should remember - and no one had ever made Tony Stark kowtow mindlessly to authority.

Loki looked at him with an oddly flat expression. "Or I will leave, you petulant child, and wait until you are prepared to do so. We have nothing but *time* and apparently I am more comfortable with that state of affairs than you are."

That statement sent a shiver of dread down Tony's spine. It was a sharp reminder of the perpetually recurring dollhouse that surrounded him. He had choices, but for all practical intents and purposes, there were a very finite number of versions he could choose. He drew back a little in his chair, not quite willing to apologize but forcefully reminded that it was better to have Loki around than not.

"What are the questions," Tony said, a half-grudging peace offering. "That the reactor raises."

Loki regarded him coolly for a long moment. Tony swallowed, waiting. Resisting the urge to say anything that would make it worse. Loki raised an eyebrow fractionally, and seemed to decide it would do.

"How it exerted an influence on you, for one." Loki's eyes took on a distant focus. "What kind of

influence it exerted, whether you were pushed out of the cycle from within, or pulled. Neither of which are what I would expect from an artefact like that, magical interactions notwithstanding."

Tony elected to concentrate on the part of that involving directional forces, and less on the part with words like 'artefact' and 'magical'. "Well, we're both in the same orientation with respect to whatever the hell time is doing, so what did your thing do? Push you out or pull you?"

"That's... surprisingly shrewd," Loki said slowly, eyeing him with new interest. "Were you simply caught in my wake somehow, it's likely you'd be spun, perhaps entirely reversed - not to mention there'd surely have been other debris. Instead, you were pushed directly from the current of time as I was." He straightened, looking pleased. "That narrows things down considerably."

Tony didn't miss the important detail in there. "Did you just call me debris?"

Loki grinned. "If it helps, you're more intelligent debris than I gave you credit for."

"Respect goes both ways, pal," Tony retorted.

Loki spread his hands, completely failing to look innocent in any way. "It was a compliment."

Just great. Tony rolled his eyes. Not only was he trapped in Groundhog Day, he was trapped in Groundhog Day with an alien asshole.

--

After about 8:20 in the morning, there were enough people in the building for Tony to get on the P.A. system and put a call out. "Attention, Stark Industries, this is your friendly king and emperor."

Strictly speaking, he knew which employees had shown up in the other versions, he could contact them directly, but even knowing the results, this way was more fun than making an internal phone call.

"Just to let you know that I am offering ten thousand dollars in the form of a personal check to anyone who can bring a set of juggling balls to my office in the next... ten minutes. The judge's decision is final, no correspondence will be entered into, and *do* remember to observe all health and safety protocols around the elevators and stairwells, thank you for your time."

In a place like Stark Tower it was kind of amazing the range of stuff people had in their desks or bags. When Loki arrived later, Tony was back in the workshop, juggling five balls with four more sitting on a nearby bench.

"This doesn't make sense, you know that?" he told Loki, still juggling as he spoke. "Muscle memory. Trained skills. Even my *stubble* starts over each day but I can strengthen neural connections?" Catch pass catch toss catch... "The whole mind/body duality thing is B.S., the mind *is* the physical, it's chemicals and electrical impulses. I shouldn't get better at this."

Catch pass catch toss catch pass catch toss. The rhythm was easy. There were versions when it hadn't been, he *remembered* that.

Loki helped himself to one of the spare juggling balls and turned it in his hands, examining it curiously. He tossed and caught it one-handed, then looked at Tony. "Have you ever heard the saying..." Loki tossed the ball again and it shimmered into five, the group of them mimicking the arching toss-catch-pass motion of Tony's set. "Your mind is playing *tricks* on you?"

"Cute," Tony said flatly. He broke up the rhythm, stopped tossing: catch, pass, catch, two in the

right hand, catch, catch, two in the left, both full hands to catch the last juggling ball. "Can't help but notice that doesn't actually explain anything."

"Well, then." Loki gave a smug little smile, like he thought he was about to catch Tony out. "Why don't you explain to me what *you* understand of the situation, with all your chemicals and your electrical impulses."

Tony walked over to the desk and put the juggling balls down next to his personalized keyboard. "You want the short version or the long version?" A few taps brought up a simple modeling program to play with in the holographic interface. "I mean, does Asgard have a concept of entropy or do I need to explain the laws of thermodynamics in high school level detail? I actually don't know what parts of physics are covered in high school, I kind of started early and just kept reading until I wound up at MIT, so."

"Assume I can understand anything you can say to me," Loki said, unimpressed, although Tony did notice that didn't actually answer the question.

Whatever. "Then we may as well skip straight to the time travel." Tony put his index fingers and thumbs together, opened the fingers away from the thumbs to draw a glittering blue line, then pulled his hands apart, arms wide, to drag the line out into a flat rectangular field. "Theory one. Four dimensions space and time. High density mass," he curled his hand in the middle of the field, pulling some of it into a ball, and gave it a little bounce to separate it out. The sphere sank into the field, distorting it downwards. "Curves space-time, bends light, turns straight lines into elliptical orbits, and most importantly, it's been shown that time moves slower closer to a black hole."

He added a smaller sphere and aimed it carefully; gave it a flick. It traveled straight at first, then was pulled into circular movement around the concave part of the field, orbiting the larger ball. "If a planet can be made to swing around instead of travel a straight line through space, it can be made to do that through time. Or something smaller than a planet, like a person-sized box... or a suit of armor."

"Clearly it's not straightforward," Loki said, coming to stand uncomfortably close behind Tony's shoulder, "or you'd have done it already." He paused, then added, "Or not, just to be a 'dick'."

"That just sounds weird when you say it," Tony muttered, scowling at having his own words turned on him. "But no, it's not. The materials needed - well, it's nothing known of on Earth. It's possible, though, everything works... Mathematically."

"Mathematically," Loki repeated, audibly smirking.

"I have *one day*," Tony said irritably. "I don't have exotic matter, I don't have a convenient supermassive object or the ability to manipulate space-time geometry, I don't have a cosmic string, rapidly rotating or otherwise - ignore that one, that's different math. About the only thing that stands even a halfway decent chance of *maybe* being feasible is if I can somehow accelerate one end of an Einstein-Rosen bridge and leverage the Casimir effect--"

And right behind him there was an Asgardian, in obvious Asgardian clothing, waving an obviously Asgardian superiority complex, and *fuck, Tony was stupid*.

Context, dammit, how many versions had he played out where *context* was the only thing that changed the answer he got, he should have learned this lesson by now. Tony groaned out loud and grabbed a handful of his own hair in utter frustration. "For the love of every-- fucking *idiotic* short-sighted --!"

"Not that I disagree," Loki said mildly, "but what is it that you've just realized you utterly failed?"

Another shot at killing Loki almost seemed worth being killed again in retribution. Tony wiped the holographic field clear instead. He'd talked to so many people, dammit. So many of the big names in theoretical physics. It just had to be the *one* that didn't... Oh dear god, he didn't look forward to explaining this to Loki.

"So," he said, and forced himself to turn around. "Does the name Jane Foster mean anything to you?"

All the condescension and amusement dropped right off Loki's face, replaced with wary suspicion. "What does Thor's little pet have to do with this?"

Yep, this was going to be terrible.

#

Chapter End Notes

The only reason this was set before Winter Soldier is so I could make that joke about Tony playing mini-golf on the Helicarrier. Assorted gentlebeings, my priorities as an author.

Einstein-Rosen Bridge and Guildenstern Are Dead

Chapter Summary

Tony and Loki pay a visit to the world's foremost authority on Einstein-Rosen bridges, which goes superbly. Eventually.

Chapter Notes

This chapter may contain adult themes and unpopular headcanons. Also, "Einstein-Rosen bridge" stopped looking like a real phrase about a week ago.

Tony strode through the halls of the University of London, outwardly ignoring the double-takes and murmurs from the people he passed. Inwardly, he couldn't help but be a little smug at every '...was that Tony Stark?' that caught his ears while Loki garnered no recognition at all.

Admittedly, 'Loki' was usually associated with leather and armor, while Loki right now had transformed his outfit into a tidy tailored suit with an exceptionally fine tie (green with delicate, curved stitching in gold; it wasn't really Tony's shade but he could recognize quality when he saw it).

They reached the office that the registry had said was Foster's, and Tony rapped on the door with his knuckles. Maybe he'd be lucky, maybe she wasn't in--

The door opened. "Office hours finished at two--" Foster started, then she saw Tony. Recognition flashed; her eyes widened, then hardened, and she shut the door again.

Loki openly laughed.

"Oh, yeah, I bet she just *loves* you," Tony snapped sarcastically. He opened the door himself, now that they knew it wasn't locked, and walked on in.

Foster frowned at him, while walking around to stand behind what was presumably a desk under all the piles of paper. "I realize you're used to being rich and famous, Doctor Stark, but actually I'm very busy, so if you don't mind--"

"Stark?" another voice repeated, and Tony turned his head. There was another woman in the room, slightly smaller than Foster, darker hair. She said, looking at Foster rather than at Tony, "He was the douche from the conference, right?"

Tony didn't need to look to know that Loki was smirking.

"I wasn't a *douche*," he started to tell the other woman, and then he reined himself in. They were here for a reason. He started to turn back to Foster and took a breath.

"I'm getting my Taser," the woman said matter-of-factly.

Tony stiffened. Something stirred in the back of his mind; sunshine mixed with dark and damp, people in suits and the sense of being trapped. He retorted, a bit more sharply than he meant to, "I'm filing charges."

Tactical error. Foster puffed up like a furious house-cat. "You're threatening my assistant now?"

"*She* threatened *me*--"

"Just because you're some hot-shot in the business world, don't think I won't call campus security on you. I'm not some junior graduate anymore, I've *seen* an Einstein-Rosen bridge, I'm not going to be intimidated by you--"

"I'm not trying to intimidate you," Tony said incredulously, not that Foster paused for an instant.

"--certainly don't have to worry about you tanking my career--"

"Why the hell would I do anything to your career?"

Taser woman snorted, rummaging in a navy-colored bag and pulling out an X26. "Wow, that's a tough one, men are known for being so rational and fair to women who reject them."

That was *absurd*, and Tony rounded on her in irritation. "Look, can you just hold back the crazy until we're done here? Because I--"

"Oh, we're done here," Foster was saying, and the woman with the Taser put the back of her free hand to her head dramatically and exclaimed, "My lady hysteria is making me crazy," and Loki was laughing, and god, Tony was about ready to shoot the lot of them and start over fresh in a new version.

He could hear Foster telling him to 'take his friend', and presumably 'get out' was going to be the end of that sentence, but instead Foster interrupted herself to say disbelievingly, "*Loki*?"

Loki, *finally*, stopped standing around laughing. Or, he stopped standing around, although he was still chuckling a little as he took a couple of steps forward and gave a disgustingly courtly bow of his head. "It is a delight to see you, Jane Foster. I mean that sincerely; this is the most entertained I've been in a very, very long time."

Tony thought about pointing out that maybe that kind of crap was the reason everyone on Asgard hated Loki, but he figured that was the kind of thing that would get him some more threats about showing respect, so he kept his mouth shut and his eyes warily on Foster's assistant. And the Taser.

"You were dead," Foster said, looking at Loki with a distressed expression.

How. How was *Loki*, Invader of New York, getting a better reception than Tony? He looked between Loki and Foster. "You know this guy stabbed your boyfriend, right? I mean, repeatedly. It's practically his hobby."

"Kind of raises the question of why you brought him here," Foster's assistant said, and now she looked like she was thinking about tasing both of them, so that was... actually kind of an improvement, from one perspective.

"I came very close to death," Loki told Foster, ignoring both interruptions, "but ultimately survived."

"You had a *sword* through your *chest*."

Loki winced a little. "As I said. I came very close to death."

Frowning, Tony realized just how little he knew about any of this. Loki had wanted to go back in time and alter something. Being stabbed through the chest? Fix the invasion, rule Earth? Something else entirely? Tony hadn't asked. It hadn't seemed the most important detail. He'd just assumed that whatever it was, it probably wasn't going to end with everyone living happily ever after.

"Does Thor know you're here?" Foster leaned forward, hands on her desk - well, on the stacks of paper on her desk. "Oh my god, does Thor know you're *alive*?"

"I have spoken with my brother," Loki said solemnly, conveniently leaving out that it had been in a completely different version of the day and that Thor from this version would have no idea. "But a graver problem brings us to your door. I apologize for our uninvited presence but it crosses into your field of expertise, and... there is some risk to the fabric of the Nine Realms." He winced as if regretting admitting that.

It would probably be counter-productive to call Loki a bullshit artist right in front of Foster and her assistant. Tony could only stare at Loki in disbelief at the utter sincerity and contrition pouring off him. He'd been known to put on a bit of an act himself now and then, but this was just *ridiculous*. And worse, Foster was lapping it up.

Even worse, Tony *knew* better and he was almost buying into it himself.

"So why didn't you bring Thor with you?" Foster asked, shooting a little sideways glance at Tony that said clearly 'instead of *him*'.

"Thor is handling what can be done on Asgard." Loki gave a wry, self-deprecating smile and actually *ducked his head*, like some harmless guy off the street instead of a murderous invader. "Since, alas, I cannot return there without forfeiting my freedom..."

"Yeah, hey, big guy!" The assistant's voice rang out cheerfully, catching everyone's attention. She was - dammit - talking into a cellphone, Taser still in her other hand, and Tony knew instantly what was about to happen.

"Nah, everything's cool, I just had a super quick question - did you know your brother was alive and in Jane's office right now?"

Loki winced more emphatically.

"You just had to go with the easily falsifiable lie, didn't you," Tony muttered, giving him a filthy look.

Loki shot an annoyed look right back at him. "She would hardly be cooperative had I said we were acting behind Thor's back."

"Yeah, that's probably a good idea," Foster's assistant said into the phone. "Uh-huh. Sure thing. Toodles!"

"Unbelievable," Tony sighed.

"You know, I was thinking something very similar." Foster had her arms folded and was glaring at both him and Loki. "I think you should *both* leave."

Loki flashed her a strained smile. It was a lot less convincing than the earlier performance. "Now I

admit, at first glance this does look slightly suspicious--"

He and Foster's assistant seemed to move at the same time, to Tony's eye: all of a sudden the assistant was aiming her Taser and Loki was *holding the wires*, somehow catching them mid-air before the electrodes could hit him.

"Whoa," said the assistant, staring wide-eyed at Loki's grip on the insulated wires.

A little frantically, Foster said, "Alright, everyone just - calm down."

This attempt was obviously a write-off. Especially considering the fact that Thor was presumably riding the Hammer Express at that very moment to come give Loki a well-deserved punch in the face. Tony considered his options and decided there was still time to slip in a little groundwork for the next version. "Jane-- Doctor Foster. Quick favor, could you pick a string of five random words? Trust me, it's important."

Foster's assistant snorted. "I've got three for you: 'no means no'."

Tony inhaled sharply. How *dare* she. An icy sense of rage washed over him and he fixed his eyes on her. He held the rest of his body motionless, thinking dark thoughts about all the nasty weapons he'd been building to use on Loki. "What the hell is that supposed to mean."

"You're such a super genius, you figure it out." She ejected the used Taser cartridge with another disturbed glance at Loki.

Tony didn't really give a damn about Loki right now. He took two steps towards the assistant, slow and measured; narrowed his eyes as she brandished the Taser defensively. Without a cartridge in it, she'd have to touch the electrodes directly to his skin to shock him, and he had no intention of letting that happen.

"I have never," he said, keeping his voice carefully controlled as he moved, "*never*. Touched a woman who didn't want it."

Foster tried to cut in. "She didn't mean to imply--"

"Yes, I did," the assistant said defiantly. "Harassing someone until they stop saying no isn't the same as them *wanting* it--"

"You've never even *met* me," Tony snarled, jerking forward; she held the Taser in front of herself and gave a warning pulse, electricity crackling between the two electrodes. "I don't know if someone bad-touched you when you were a kid or you're just one of those 'kill all men' feminazis, and I don't really care, but keep your man-hating delusions to yourself--"

"That's enough!" Foster yelled, sounding pretty pissed off herself. "You don't get to barge in here and, and... just *demand* our time and insult my best friend-- The world does not revolve around you!"

Loki cocked his head thoughtfully. "Actually, an argument could be made that right now--"

"And you!" Foster threw her hands in the air. "I don't even know where to begin with you! You have no idea what you've put Thor through, *again* from what I understand, and I don't know what you're doing with *him* but it can't be anything good--"

"I bought you some drinks, I didn't murder a pet, for crying out loud!"

"I'm not arguing this with you!" Foster's tirade was loud enough that it covered whatever nasty thing her assistant was muttering. "This is not up for debate! You will both leave, or I'm calling campus security, right now!"

Did she really think campus security were going to be any kind of match for an Asgardian? Tony opened his mouth, then found a hand clapped over it as Loki dragged him forcefully towards the door. He glared fiercely at Loki, but went along with it so he could at least keep his balance and leave on his own two feet. Loki seemed like the type who would have no qualms about bodily dragging him if necessary.

In the corridor, Loki released him and performed a little gesture that made Foster's office door swing quietly closed. Tony rubbed his arm where Loki had grabbed him. Yeah, that was going to hurt for the rest of this version.

With a smirk, Loki said, "Well, that went well."

"Wow, that's an original joke," Tony said snidely; "you come up with that one yourself?" He was still angry, seething at the absolute *bullshit* Foster's assistant had been spouting.

"Hm, it's old, you're right, but I'm feeling strangely nostalgic." Loki smiled broadly, eyes glittering with petty humor. "Delicate negotiations... a partner with easily stung pride... his outraged anger derailing the whole thing despite my valiant efforts to continue... Yes, for some strange reason I'm thinking of my youth, I can't imagine why."

Tony put his hand on Loki's chest, with a little shove (that felt like shoving a brick wall) to make sure he had Loki's full attention. "That wasn't some petty little comment in there, that wasn't some cheap shot about ego or money or any of the crap people usually try. She basically called me a rapist!"

Loki looked coldly down at Tony's hand, then met his eyes. "Well, I suppose you'll need to decide if that's cause to stay stranded outside of time, won't you?"

"That's all you have to say?" Tony said incredulously, but he did lower his hand.

"I have been accused of much worse." Loki spread his hands with a contemptuous little curl of his lip. "Yet, I survived. Despite how fragile Midgardians are, I suspect you will also recover from this grievous wound."

"*You're* pulling the 'sticks and stones' line? The guy who invaded my planet because people back home were *mean* to him?" Tony gave a short laugh at the darkening look on Loki's face. "You are the last person who gets to lecture me about taking the high road."

"In that case, I'll take my leave. Perhaps when I return you'll be feeling more agreeable." Loki disappeared in a shimmer of gold.

Dammit. *Dammit*. Tony scowled and clenched a fist uselessly. Not only had that been a complete waste, but now he was stuck in London because his ride home had ditched him. Terrific.

--

It was Thursday November fourteenth, thirty-five degrees and clear. Tony went to the workshop and pulled up everything Jane Foster had ever published on Einstein-Rosen bridges.

She'd written about visual observations and atmospheric disturbances. Where was the stuff about traveling through one? About Asgard, about any hints on how they generated it? Tony checked

some records and *oh*. Foster had been taken to Asgard in October. This... year, assuming years were a thing that had existed. If she'd finished any articles about it they were sitting in an editor's inbox, or in peer review.

Well, damn.

He made do with what he could access, poring over every detail. Foster was good, he'd give her that. She had a really impressive knack for pattern recognition, identifying elements in the raw data that then guided more complex computer analysis. And of course, the feature which had sidelined her work in the first place - when calculations gave a result that seemed impossible, instead of writing it off, she was willing to consider that modern understandings of 'impossible' were the error.

The people who'd called her a crackpot were probably kicking themselves now that actual aliens had proven Einstein-Rosen bridges as a feasible method of travel.

Eventually, Tony glanced around the workshop and furrowed his brow. "Jarvis, time?"

"Eleven fifty-eight a.m., sir."

Loki should have arrived long before now. Unless Loki didn't remember, Loki had reset like everybody else, Tony was still alone in this and repeating forever again and again and--

Stop. He let his breath out slowly, stifling the twist of panic in his gut. Think. Loki had made that threat about respect and just going away until Tony was ready to play nice. So, probably Loki was just taking a version off. Maybe a few versions, because Loki was prone to over-reacting. This was... this was probably fine. There was no reason for Loki to keep his memories for so many versions, then start resetting. Breathe.

Tony sat still for a couple of minutes, concentrating on the flow of air in and out of his lungs. Smooth, steady rhythm. A version off was a good idea, come to think of it. He was stressed out and letting things get to him too easily.

He wanted to just *not think* for a while and he'd learned a few ways to achieve exactly that.

Tony changed into street clothes, shoved a cap and sunglasses on, and headed out for a walk. There were better-recommended places in other boroughs, but this one was good enough and he liked that it was in walking distance. Getting out into the air and stretching his legs felt good. Apart from all the versions where he and Loki had blasted each other halfway through Manhattan, he'd spent too much time cooped up in his workshop recently.

When he got to the tattoo parlor, there was already someone in there with the needle buzzing away on their skin. It was later than Tony had shown up in other versions, this must be someone who'd had their appointment postponed in those ones. Tony ignored the receptionist and called across the room, "Hey, you in the chair. For ten thousand smackaroos you mind coming back and getting that finished another day?"

The tattooist stopped. The man in the chair said, "Um."

"How's twenty thousand?" Tony suggested, taking off his cap and tossing it to the receptionist. He could still hear buzzing; someone in a sectioned-off room, getting a tattoo in a sensitive location. "Don't haggle, I'm impatient and I'll go somewhere else if I need to."

"You know what, twenty grand works for me," the man said wryly.

"Great." Tony pulled out his checkbook and scrawled out a check for twenty thousand, aware of the tattooist folding her arms in the corner of his vision. Jazz tended to be unimpressed by his attitude in the best of versions, which this probably... wasn't.

He haggled with her next: promised he wouldn't change his mind and sue, claimed she'd been highly recommended, offered to sign whatever waivers she needed. When she demanded why he couldn't just make an appointment like anyone else, he tipped his head down to give her a serious look over the sunglasses. "Security concerns."

It wasn't hard to put a grim look on his face like he was remembering some particular incident - there were plenty to choose from, if it came to that - and her expression softened a bit.

"Fine," Jazz said eventually, because money tended to talk people around even if the soulful eyes didn't. "But the douchebag glasses come off."

"Why does everyone call me a douche lately?" Tony muttered, taking off his sunglasses. He flicked through one of the sample books, showed Jazz what he claimed to want (size and the time it would take were his main criteria) and let her walk him through the prep and the waivers before he stripped off his shirts.

Her voice was familiar and he couldn't remember if she reminded him of someone in particular or if it was just that he'd been here in other versions.

Finally, finally, it was time for Tony to lie face down in the freshly cleaned massage chair, close his eyes, and relax.

Tattooing was weird. Jazz sketched out a draft first, her gloved hands firm and sure on his back. When she switched to the needle it hurt, all sharp and scratching. The first time, it had made Tony think of animal claws, just little ones. But after a while the nerves in his skin seemed to all blur together. The needle was more a sense of pressure and warmth than pain. Or maybe like a masseuse digging in to an aching muscle; the pain was overridden by how *satisfying* it was.

"How you doing there?" Jazz murmured, and Tony made a vague rumbling sound in his throat. It made her pause. "Stark? You with me?"

Ugh, fine. Words. "Yeah," Tony forced out. "S just. Endorphins. Y'know."

"Ah," she said, immediately sounding more comfortable. "Yeah, it happens that way for some people. I'll keep checking in on you. Lindy, can you grab a bottle of water from the fridge?"

Tony tuned her out again and let himself sink back into the sensation. It was so restful to just switch his mind off. All he had to deal with was the rich throb of his back, hot and diffuse. The whole world narrowed down to the press of his skin. It was intense and heady and perfect.

He wasn't about to call it better than sex, but it was better than *some* sex, that was for sure.

By the time the tattoo was done, Tony could feel the warm buzz right down to his bones.

--

In some versions, Tony got in the Iron Man suit and flew. Just flew, as far or as fast or as high as his whims took him; did barrel rolls and mid-air acrobatics, turned on a dime; traveled with the sun or against it, made his own objections to the unreliability of time.

He just flew.

--

"Good morning, sir. It's seven a.m., Thursday fourteenth. The weather in New York City is thirty-five degrees and clear, with an expected high of fifty-four."

Tony gave a leisurely stretch, feeling... comfortable. Actually okay. "Hold all calls, cancel all reminders," he instructed.

Was Loki likely to show up in this version? No, probably more of the silent treatment. Besides, Tony didn't particularly feel like arranging his plans around a literal black-leather-costume-wearing villain. He'd go see Foster on his own, the armor was fast enough.

This time, he knocked on the door then walked on in, and made sure that the first thing he said was, "I'm sorry to interrupt, Doctor Foster; I'm sure you have a lot of demands on your time."

See? Polite. Non-confrontational. He could be non-confrontational.

"I do, actually," Foster said, giving him an unfriendly look from behind her desk. "If you'd like to make an appointment--"

"I would but there's a bit of a... time constraint." He glanced at Foster's assistant and gave a little wave to get it over with. "Hi, yes, I'm Tony Stark, the douche from the conference." Generally, pre-empting people's insults calmed things down. Generally. He could only hope it would do the same here. "What's your name?"

"I'm Darcy Lewis." She folded her arms across her chest, eyeing him with dislike. "And I carry a Taser. Fair warning."

This time, Tony bit his tongue. The comment still unsettled him and he didn't know why; not remembering was actually worse than the slight unease. He gave a simple nod, and turned back to Foster. "What I'm about to tell you is going to sound really farfetched, but I can prove it. I just need you to choose a random string of five words."

Foster's frown deepened. "Doctor Stark, if you've just come here to waste my time in some childish prank..."

"Why would I-- okay, that probably does sound like something I would do." Tony put on his best sincere face, holding Foster's gaze. "Just pick five random words. Please. Write them down if you like."

Foster held out a couple of moments, then sighed and muttered, "Fine." She looked down for a while, obviously thinking, then nodded. "Okay."

It didn't really matter what Tony said in here, because he was unlikely to guess them. "Frog, tattoo, membrane, lightning... apple juice."

"Apple juice is two words," Lewis pointed out snidely.

"Not even close," Foster said, giving him a confused and irritated look. "I don't know what this is about but I've got actual work to do. You can see yourself out."

"Hang on," Tony said. "I will, I'll leave. Just-- tell me what the words were."

If she refused, he'd have to replay and make sure to get her to write them down, then he could steal the bit of paper - it would take up another version but as Loki had pointed out, neither of them were

exactly short on *time*.

It wasn't necessary, though. Foster raised her chin and said, "Sinister, dust, ream, particle, ambulatory. Are we done here?"

"Thanks," Tony said, committing them to memory. Sinister, dust, ream, particle, ambulatory. Sinister, dust, ream, particle, ambulatory. "See you tomorrow," he added sardonically.

'Tomorrow'. It may as well have been 'Fantasyland'.

"Um, weirdo much?" Lewis was saying as he left.

Tony went and got himself a cheeseburger, because he hadn't really tasted stuff in a while, and then he headed back home and went to the workshop to wrestle with the math.

--

"I'm sorry to interrupt, Doctor Foster; I'm sure you have a lot of demands on your time."

"I do, actually," Foster said, giving him an unfriendly look. "If you'd like to make an appointment--"

"I would but there's a bit of a... time constraint." Tony glanced at Lewis and gave the same little wave. He'd learned that changing small details had a weird tendency to alter people's reactions. He needed Foster to pick the same words. "Hi, yes, I'm Tony Stark, the douche from the conference. What's your name?"

"I'm Darcy Lewis." She folded her arms across her chest, eyeing him with dislike. "And I carry a Taser. Fair warning."

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"Why would I-- okay, that does sound like something I'd probably do." Tony put on his sincere face. "Just pick five random words. Please. Write them down if you like."

When Foster was ready, Tony gave her a crisp nod and reeled off, "Sinister, dust, ream, particle, ambulatory."

Foster stared at him in shock. "What-- How did you do that?"

"Whoa, seriously?" Lewis said, sounding interested and for the first time almost non-hostile.

"This is the part that's going to sound farfetched," Tony admitted. "You've seen Groundhog Day, right?"

"No way!" Lewis yelped, but Foster's expression only hardened again.

"That's absurd. Mind-reading is a more plausible explanation than-- You must have used that, what magicians do, priming - I don't know how but I'm not an idiot, Doctor Stark. It's going to take a little more than that to impress me."

"Okay." Tony rubbed at his forehead. "Another five words? What would you take as proof?"

Foster looked at him, eyes narrowed in thought. Finally she leaned forward a little, and Tony had the feeling he wasn't going to like this even as she opened her mouth.

--

"I'm sorry to interrupt, Doctor Foster; I'm sure you have a lot of demands on your time."

"I do, actually," Foster said, again. "If you'd like to make an appointment--"

"I would but there's a bit of a... time constraint." Tony glanced at Lewis and gave the little wave.

"Hi, yes, I'm Tony Stark, the douche from the conference. What's your name?"

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"Okay." Tony rubbed at his forehead. "Another five words? What would you take as proof?"

Foster thought for a while, and leaned forward, and Tony squared his shoulders and recited along with her, "My name is Tony Stark and I should learn to back off the first time."

After enough versions he managed to say it without gritted teeth.

Foster's eyes had grown wide during the sentence and when they were done she sat back and stared at him.

"And for the record," Tony added (he'd tried skipping this part and it tended to lead to Lewis interpreting something as a threat and tasing him), "I've known a hell of a lot of women who told me they *have* to act disinterested to start with if they want to ever be taken seriously. So, forgive me for giving you the chance to protect your reputation."

Lewis took a breath to speak and Tony shook his head, pointing at her. "No, not the 'she was just playing hard to get' line, it's the 'I know full well that women in STEM are damned if they do and

damned if they don't line, and when I was sure which one Doctor Foster was then I *stopped*."

"Well, that's very noble of you," Foster said, with the same bitter smile as the previous versions. "So what you're saying is that it was worth making me uncomfortable just so that you could double- and triple-check there wasn't a hidden possibility I secretly wanted to get into your pants."

Tony sighed. He didn't like how both women interpreted it, but he did feel less angry after having talked to them a little. "Look, I can't pretend to know what it's like, trying to break into the boys' club. I'm just saying that's what was going through my head. I'm not expecting us to be best buddies, I just want us to be able to work together."

"To solve Groundhog Day," Foster said skeptically.

Tony grimaced. "I usually refer to it as a twenty-four hour repeating time-loop."

"...Yeah, that's just as bad." Foster's brow furrowed, and she leaned back in her chair again. "Do you have any theories?"

"A geometric distortion in space-time is one thing, but me knowing about it?" Tony shook his head. "Nothing that would sufficiently explain the accruing memories, no. Eventually I gave up on explaining the phenomenon and started looking into time travel directly. I figured, maybe if I could just get to a point *past* the distortion..."

"But why would you come to-- Oh, you want to use an Einstein-Rosen bridge! If you can rapidly accelerate one end while maintaining the internal structure..."

"You separate the ends in time, exactly," Tony nodded.

"Okaaay," Lewis said brightly. "That's my cue to go on a coffee run."

Foster tucked a bit of hair behind her ear distractedly. "Oh, that would be wonderful, thanks Darcy. But wait, the quantum field effects-- the whole structure would collapse, you'd need massive amounts of negative energy..."

"I know," Tony agreed reluctantly. "I've been through the math... more than a few times. But you know more about Einstein-Rosen bridges than anyone on the planet. I- If there's a way..."

There was a way. There had to be a way.

--

Once he established a procedure to get Foster onside, it grew familiar very quickly. *Sinister, dust, ream, particle, ambulatory. My name is Tony Stark and I need to learn...* They worked on the math version after version, manipulating and re-manipulating equations, debating the properties of the required materials, simulating negative energy fields and spacetime loops.

Tony talked her through the workings of the arc reactor, making sure she knew how much power was available for the project. They did as much as they could in a day, then Tony started over again. *Sinister, dust, ream, particle, ambulatory. You've seen Groundhog Day, right?*

Repeat.

--

In one version Loki opened the door and said, "*There* you are."

Foster gave a small squeak. Lewis said, "Dude, I can't tell if you're aiming for biker or Goth, but whatever it is you are *not* pulling it off."

"By the way," Tony said helpfully; "Thor's brother is alive and he's kind of stuck in it too."

"Thor's brother?" Lewis repeated, drawing back a little and glancing towards her bag. "The crazy one?"

"He only has one brother," Loki said, then shrugged. "But that's a fair assessment."

"I saw you die," Foster insisted, eyes wide and distressed just like in the other version she'd seen Loki. "You had a sword *right through you*."

Yeah, Tony really had to get the rest of that story at some point. He leaned back in his chair, watching them.

"I remember," Loki said, voice slightly strained. "It was extremely painful, if that makes you feel better."

"No, that doesn't *make me feel better*, what kind of person do you think I am?!" Foster's voice rose in both pitch and volume. "You can't just stand there all-- How can you-- Aargh!"

"I've been close to death before," Loki said, still with that hint of strain in his voice. "And this was longer ago for me than it was for you. You'll have to forgive me if the drama has somewhat... worn off. Have you made any progress?" he added to Tony, clearly done with that portion of the conversation.

"Some," Tony said slowly. "We still don't have the right materials on Earth, but... I guess we're not really limited to Earth, are we?"

"I can probably obtain whatever it is you need." Loki glanced around the small office. "Such as another chair, for a start."

"This is more than just waking up in Groundhog Day, isn't it?" Foster said suddenly. She was talking to Tony but watching Loki with a wary expression as he conjured an ostentatious velvet wingback chair, apparently out of thin air. "Everything he's capable of... it's too much of a coincidence. What haven't you told me?"

"Ah," said Loki, saving Tony the trouble. "I tried to cast a time travel spell and it went... somewhat awry."

Somewhat awry. Tony closed his eyes, absorbing the magnitude of that understatement. *Somewhat fucking awry*. No kidding.

"What were you planning on doing?" Foster asked sharply. "Have another go at invading New York? Have another go at killing Thor and rule Asgard?"

"Don't be absurd," Loki said matter-of-factly. "I was going to go back to when I was an infant and kill the babe before Odin could take it home."

Tony opened his eyes.

Foster was staring at Loki in dismay. Lewis was staring like she wasn't sure whether to believe him. Tony wasn't sure he believed it himself, but the way Loki had just *said* it, like it made perfect sense, was... unnerving.

"What?" Loki said, sounding a little defensive. "You must admit, it would have saved everyone a great deal of trouble."

"I take it back," Tony said, shifting uncomfortably. "I didn't get more crazy than you."

Loki rolled his eyes a little and apparently decided a change of subject was in order. "What is this day of groundhogs you spoke of? I've seen no particular celebrations."

"It's the name of a movie," Tony answered, still feeling strange within himself. "A story acted out and recorded for play-back. About a guy in a time-loop."

He wasn't used to... People weren't real, they just reset, no matter what happened. They were always going to reset and be exactly the same. But Loki didn't reset and Loki wanted to-- *Did* Loki want to die? He didn't sound like he wanted to but he was kind of unpredictable and for once that unpredictability wasn't reassuring or a relief.

Dammit, Tony wasn't used to having *feelings* about people's *wellbeing*. He hadn't practiced any responses for this.

"It's got Bill Murray in it," Foster said. She looked like she was in shock.

"Does it include a solution?" Loki asked, looking interested. "How does it end?"

Lewis stifled a snort, the first real sound she'd made since finding out who Loki was. Tony knew immediately what she was thinking. He faked a scowl over at the corner she was lurking in, but he was actually kind of relieved for the distraction. "As if, Lewis."

Loki immediately looked right at him and demanded, "What?"

Tony rolled his eyes and stifled a smile. "True love."

Loki blinked. Then said, flatly and with great finality, "No."

Wow, okay, there was no need to be quite so... *definite* about it. Tony huffed a little. "Well, you're not exactly Andie McDowell either, there, pal. Can we get back to the science?"

"We might need more than that," Foster said. She still looked troubled, but a little more present, at least. "I mean, it's still science, but-- Asgard-level science. To do what you're talking about, Doctor Stark - not just generate an Einstein-Rosen bridge, not just direct it, but to capture and manipulate one of the ends that way? That's... a big ask."

That had been her opinion in all the other versions Tony had worked with her, too. Especially considering that the required materials didn't exist on Earth. Everything led back to the same answer: it was too complicated to do in a single day.

And if it couldn't be done in a day, any preparations would just reset.

Tony lowered his eyes, throat thick with disappointment and... fear. There had to be a way out, there *had* to. He stared at his hands to make sure they weren't trembling.

"You would use the Bifrost?" Loki said curiously.

Foster answered almost eagerly. "Yes, or a similar phenomenon. You see, because of relativity, if you can accelerate one of the ends close to the speed of light it will effectively experience time more slowly. But the ends exist simultaneous to each other, so anything passing through will

emerge when the opposite end is at the same 'age' as the entry point. So, depending whether you enter from the stationery or accelerated end, you can travel ahead or backwards in time."

Loki was silent for a moment, then said, "And you thought of this?"

There was a strange tone in Loki's voice, and Tony looked up.

"Doctor Stark did," Foster said, looking between the two of them.

"Others have proposed it," Tony said uneasily. He didn't know what Loki was thinking and he was torn between hope and caution. His heart thumped firm and fast. "We've just been refining the idea a little."

"I should have realized the Bifrost could be used in such a way," Loki murmured.

Tony exchanged an uncertain glance with Foster. "Uh, don't feel too bad," he told Loki awkwardly. "As far as I know Asgard doesn't really have academic journals or... well, research centers of any kind, really--"

"You misunderstand," Loki said, speaking more firmly. "I spent so much of *this* learning about Jotunheim and trying to accept them, yet I missed what was right in front of me. I told myself that I have outgrown the teachings of Asgard, that I had learned that the other races are no lesser, yet still I underestimated Midgard."

"Thanks, I guess?" Tony wondered if that meant Loki would stop threatening him about 'respect'.

"You have *definitely* changed," Foster said, sounding a little amused. She glanced at Tony. "If I had any doubt before, I think that just convinced me."

"I know what we should do," Loki said, sitting up straight in the wingback. "The lady Foster is correct in that it will likely take a combination of magic and your Midgardian science. We must understand one another's disciplines so that we can understand how best to join them."

"Wait," said Tony, "I see where this is going and I don't--"

Loki smirked and interrupted him, "How would you like to learn magic, Tony Stark?"

"You have to be kidding," Tony said.

Foster said, not quite under her breath, "It's not *magic*, it's just more advanced..."

"Explain Groundhog Day," Tony retorted at her, then wondered what had become of his life that he was actually defending the existence of magic. He looked back at Loki. "Seriously though? Isn't that one of those... hermit in the wilderness, lifetime of study kind of things?"

Loki gave a wry smile, although to Tony it also looked a little regretful. "A lifetime? I dare say... it will take you a single day."

A single day but countless versions of it. "You're a laugh riot," Tony said sourly.

#

How is a Ravenclaw Like a Writing Desk?

Chapter Summary

Loki tries to teach Tony magic; Tony tries to live in denial.

Chapter Notes

Sorry, meant to have this up yesterday.

If you don't enjoy technobabble (or the magical equivalent), this may not be the chapter for you!

There were several facts that Tony knew, beyond a doubt.

1. It was Thursday, November fourteenth, 2013.
2. Linear momentum of a rigid body was equal to the product of the mass of the body and the velocity of its center of mass.
3. The attraction (or repulsion) between two charges was directly proportional to the product of the charges and inversely proportional to the square of the distance between them.
4. Magic was bullshit.

"Bad touch!" he yelped, as Loki physically repositioned him, yet again. "Hands off the merchandise!"

"You must open your mind. You cannot alter the course of the universe if you cannot *hear* it," Loki said impatiently.

"I don't know much about Asgardian anatomy but *that is not where I hear from--*"

"Stop *fighting* me--"

Obviously that just made Tony fight harder. He put both hands on Loki's chest and shoved as hard as he could, which meant that Loki took a single step backwards that was probably more out of politeness than anything else.

Tony filled his voice with finality and said, "Look, this isn't working."

"You have the potential for magic," Loki insisted, clearly frustrated. "I *checked*. You simply need to try harder."

Tony flung his hands in the air in exasperation. "You said *not* to try harder! You said I was thinking too much!"

"You are thinking too much! How can you expect to hear anything if your mind is filled with your own voice?"

They glowered at each other for a moment. Tony rubbed the back of his neck tiredly. "Look," he

said, a little more calmly, "let's come at this from a different angle, okay? Forget the third eye, meditation, hocus pocus routine. I don't need to *do* magic, I only need to understand how it works."

"How can you hope to understand it without hearing, without feeling the flow of energy..." Loki trailed off, shaking his head.

"It's not like we're going to be *less* productive," Tony muttered.

--

"Good morning, sir. It's seven a.m., Thursday fourteenth. The weather in New York City is thirty-five degrees and clear, with an expected high of fifty-four."

"Hold all calls, cancel all reminders."

Sometimes for variety Tony would say it the other way around. Then he'd go to the workshop, spend a little time on Einstein-Rosen bridges and a little time testing himself on the principles of 'magic'. In some versions, he'd throw in something unrelated like whittling or calligraphy or hacking secret agencies in alphabetical order just to keep himself from going craz--

Well... to keep some variety in there, anyway.

Loki would show up about 10:03 and they'd go from there. Magic. Physics. A lot of back-and-forth insults and aggravation. For all that Loki claimed to have realized that Asgard wasn't any better or shinier than any other place, he was still pretty defensive and uptight.

Loki's reaction to any given law of classical physics was usually an eye roll and a scathing, "Well, *that's* not true." When he was particularly annoyed he usually tried to provoke Tony into a fight.

Admittedly, there had been some memorable exceptions. Like the time Loki had interrupted an explanation of electromagnetic fields, "I'm bored and frustrated. We should have sex."

("Wow," Tony had deadpanned; "you really know how to make a girl feel special.")

Loki rolled his eyes. "I'm bored, frustrated, and you're not entirely unattractive. Do you want to have sex or not?"

Faced with that compelling argument, there was really only one answer. "Weirdly, it turns out 'no'.")

Tony had lost count of how many versions of the day they'd spent trying to go over basic principles, getting frustrated with each other, and arguing bitterly. Occasionally the arguments would go too far and there would be several versions without Loki showing up. They may have gone back to killing each other a few times.

Tony was kind of uncomfortable to realize he actually preferred being killed and waking up fresh than the quiet, dragging versions when Loki didn't appear at all. Yeah, he could play out his favorite versions, get tattooed, mess around with men, fly the suit, whatever. He couldn't shake the itching anxiety in the back of his mind that maybe he was so crazy that he'd imagined someone going through it with him.

Just like he thought he remembered a unidirectional timeline, a 'before' that went forward and never reset, he also thought he remembered a person who altered fixed events and referenced previous versions of the day.

Those were bad. Tony thought it might be getting worse. He wasn't sure.

--

"I hate you," he said out loud. "I hate this. You're making this up. It doesn't make any *sense*."

"So says the mortal who insists a time-loop should cause his hippocampus to deteriorate," Loki retorted.

"If it's not resetting, then it should!" Tony insisted. "This nonsense about... just commanding the universe to do what you want, that's just repackaged hippie bullshit about the power of positive thinking. You may as well stick it on a motivational poster with a picture of a kitten. The real world doesn't *work* like that."

"The real world," Loki said snidely, "has more than one day in it."

"So *you* say," Tony muttered. "Maybe we're both just computer simulations and we don't know it."

Actually that... would explain a lot, and Tony mentally flagged that idea for his Other Theories collection.

It had occurred to Tony more than once that if they could solve-- *when* they solved this, when they figured it out... giving Loki access to functioning time travel was probably a disastrous idea. He wondered, if he could skip past the distortion on his own, without Loki, would that mean Loki would be stuck in the time-loop? Would Loki only exist in every permutation of November fourteenth, and never after?

That should be a good thing but thinking about it gave Tony that horrified, itchy panic at the back of his throat and he hurried to think about something else instead.

--

"*Completely* untrue," Loki muttered at the text on his display.

Tony couldn't take it one . more . freaking . time. "Just pretend!" he shouted in exasperation. "For the love of... anything that you actually *love*! We are never going to get anywhere if you won't even entertain the notion--"

"Why should I if you will not do the same?" Loki snapped back, glaring at him. "When I speak to you of magic you cast scorn on facts even a child knows! If you--"

"What do you want me to do?! Just pretend this is the world's worst Dungeons and Drag--" Tony stopped short.

It was Loki's turn to look exasperated. "You've just realized that whatever that is will actually help, haven't you."

"No," Tony said petulantly. "...But actually, probably yes." He made a face, already feeling ridiculous. "Fine. Explain to me how magic works in this totally fictional fantasy world we're role-playing in."

Loki sighed, heavily, and began again.

--

Once Tony distanced himself from it - told himself these were just the rules of some fictional world

- it was, embarrassingly, a lot easier. Out of context of reality and physics, the things Loki insisted were true did actually... make kind of a coherent framework. It was better world-building than a lot of fiction Tony had read,

(had he? did he just think he remembered that?)

that was for sure.

Fundamentally, according to Loki, the universe was made up of stories. Magic was about persuading the universe that your version was more true than the existing version. It was patently ridiculous in reality, but as the basis for a hot new fantasy book series, Tony could kind of deal with that idea.

Of course, 'stories' were basically groups of smaller pieces of information. For several versions in a row, Loki brought along a large book that generated holograms from the runes on its pages. It seemed targeted towards absolute beginners, and Tony had a hunch that it was basically the Asgardian equivalent of something like 'My First Science Book'.

The book explained that when 'primitive cultures' started exploring magic, they often developed special chants and code-words to communicate their wishes to the universe. Combining the right bits of information to make the story they wanted. Kind of like formulae in a way. Asgard, though, had long ago proven that the language wasn't important so long as the mage could focus their intent.

Given that Asgard didn't care that much about magic, the book was weirdly insistent that Asgard was the *Best Realm Ever* at studying it or performing it.

On a whim, Tony narrowed his eyes at a stack of papers and muttered, "Win-gar-dium levi-o-sa."

Nothing happened, obviously, but when he turned back towards the desk with the book opened on it, he could see Loki regarding him with an eyebrow raised in amusement.

"What?" Tony said defensively. "It says right here the actual words don't matter. --Good heavens *you* read Harry Potter."

"Well," Loki said, with an idle shrug, "tales about a boy who finds a place where his magic is encouraged and valued, instead of reviled. What about that do you think I'd be opposed to?"

"My god, you read Harry Potter and *you think you're Harry*." Tony almost couldn't believe what he was hearing. This was the most hilarious look inside Loki's mind he'd ever had. "You know that Harry didn't want to take over the world, right?"

It was hilarious but also kind of uncomfortable, if he stopped to think about it - about Loki's family, about being adopted and feeling second-best - but *Harry Potter was not a mass-murderer, hello*.

Loki only huffed and made a small gesture that sent the papers flying, scattering them over the floor.

"Oh, well, that's mature," Tony said, getting over that moment of discomfort pretty easily. He started to pick up the papers. "I see you're really taking the angry teenager thing to heart."

In retaliation, Loki queued up a YouTube playlist of physics demonstrations by a weedy guy with the most nasal, monotonous, unpleasant voice Tony had ever heard.

After about four and a half of them, Tony said, "Okay, but, you know you're not Harry, right? If anything, you're Draco."

"Silence, mudblood," Loki sneered, and *hey*, that was a joke, Loki made an actual joke about it, and Tony laughed. Loki looked briefly startled then grinned like he couldn't quite help himself.

For once, Tony felt a strange flicker of something like affection.

--

Conversation... happened. They couldn't talk about magic and physics all the time. They talked about the worst hotels (or alien equivalent) they'd ever stayed in, they talked about business or diplomatic triumphs, they talked about military tactics - Loki recreated the Battle of some place called Drottningholm on one of the workshop tables with little illusory armies.

Illusions, apparently, were more sophisticated magic than simply creating or summoning the thing you wanted an illusion of. It involved persuading the universe not that something was there, but that something *looked* like it was there even though it wasn't there and wouldn't behave like it was there. Essentially it was convincing the universe to lie, which it resisted, and whenever Loki cast his illusions he was actually just being an incredible show-off.

Tony couldn't help but find that pretty relatable.

--

In one of several versions when Tony was spinning in his chair while pretending to learn superstitious nonsense, he found himself wondering about the thing Foster had kept talking about, Loki dying or almost dying or whatever it was.

He put a foot on the ground to stop the chair's rotation and looked up at Loki curiously. "Weren't you meant to be in space prison, or something? What was the whole deal with getting stabbed by a sword? Let me guess, they tried to execute you and just failed miserably?"

Loki gave him a strange look. "Thor is *in this building*. Hasn't he told you?"

Tony tried to think back. He remembered that Loki had brought an army of aliens, but completely different aliens. He couldn't remember if anyone had said why the alien army was working for Loki. He remembered... okay, he didn't exactly *remember* Thor and Loki leaving but he was pretty sure he remembered knowing that Thor had taken Loki back to Asgard to be punished.

"I know Foster got taken to Asgard," he said, although he couldn't actually remember who'd told him that. "That's why Thor's here, there's meant to be a team debrief about the stuff that happened, but I can't remember if we... had any of it?"

Loki looked at him a moment longer, frowning, then seemed to shake it off. "It was not an execution, not in the way that you mean. Jane Foster became... you might say poisoned, by a substance called the Aether. Thor brought her to Asgard to aid her, and while she was there Asgard was attacked by others who sought to use the Aether's power. Thor took me from my cell to fight at his side, which is when Jane Foster witnessed the sword of one of Malekith's soldiers strike me," Loki touched his chest, "about here."

He shot Tony a rueful smile. "And so I died tragically in Thor's arms, which would have made an excellent tale were it not for the fact that apparently I only fell unconscious. I woke later, alone and in a great deal of discomfort, but slowly healing."

Tony didn't trust that smile. It was the kind of smile that was usually covering up unpleasantness. Given that the story already included Loki getting stabbed through the chest, Tony wasn't sure he wanted to know how much more unpleasant it could get. "And how long after that until you decided time traveling infanticide would solve all your problems?"

"I'd already had the idea, but there wasn't much I could do from my cell," Loki said with a shrug. "Once I was free, I had access to the palace library. I'll admit I hadn't really considered it very seriously until then. It only became a real possibility in my mind when I found a particular tome that went into more detail."

"I think maybe you should have done a little more background reading," Tony said, without any real spite. The nastier jabs were mostly reserved for when they were properly fighting.

"At least--" Loki paused, looked Tony over, and grimaced. "Well. Until recently. I *thought* that at least this time, I was the only one truly harmed by my mistake. I'm still unclear as to how you came to be affected."

Tony scowled, starting to reconsider a little spite. "Yeah well, this is one party I could have done without getting invited to."

"Which we will endeavor to correct," Loki said in a tone edged with steel. He narrowed his eyes at Tony and then said, seemingly non sequitur, "The texts you have me studying. How soon before they touch on the Midgardian brain? That hippocampus you keep whining about."

Tony blinked at the unexpected question. "It's a physics curriculum, there's nothing about the brain in there. That's biology. Why do you care?"

"You said it had electrical impulses," Loki insisted, like he was accusing him of something.

"It does, but that's just how the cells work, all the detail is biological. What does my brain have to do with fixing time?" Tony folded his arms, uneasy and confused.

"Nothing." Loki shook his head slightly. "I was just curious. We don't... think of it the same way you do."

At this point, Tony was clearly supposed to ask how Asgardians did think of the brain, but having just been reminded that Loki was to blame for this whole... situation, he was in the mood to be a bit of an ass. "Not really surprising," he said instead. "Different cultures, after all."

"You're supposed to ask how we do think of it," Loki said drily.

Tony snorted. "Why don't you just fill in my whole side of the conversation, then?"

Loki gave a slow, toothy smile. "Why, if it pleases you, Stark, certainly."

Two illusions shimmered into being; one of each of them. The illusion of Tony clasped its hands together, gazing at the one of Loki with an expression somewhere between awe and adoration. "Oh, Loki, how fascinating! Would you enlighten me? How do you think of such things, on Asgard?"

"My voice sounds nothing like that," Tony said, rolling his eyes. "Also, your hair is oilier."

The Loki draped an arm around the Tony's shoulders, tugging it close and smiling down paternally. "Well, I'll try to put it in terms you might understand. You understand the concept of a soul or a spirit, yes?"

"Yes," said the illusion of Tony, eyebrows drawing together in consternation, "but it's not *scientific*! Consciousness exists in a body!" It honest-to-god stamped a foot.

The Loki chuckled. "Oh, you Midgardians! If that were true, how would anyone navigate the Astral Plane? No, I assure you, spirits are very real. You're partly right, in that each one is *linked* to a particular body - but the brain is the organ that detects the spirit, not the spirit itself."

"What," said Tony, flatly.

"What?" gasped the illusion of Tony, wide-eyed and incredulous.

"Consider this. Your physics texts described a television set, which shows moving images. It generates the images itself, in its screen." The illusion of Loki gestured in front of them with its free hand. "But it doesn't *choose* what images to generate. It simply detects a signal, and translates that signal into the appropriate lights."

"Did you literally just compare consciousness to CBS," Tony said.

The illusion of Tony, meanwhile, looked as if pure enlightenment had dawned on it. "So the impulses and processes in the brain aren't what *makes* thought - they're the indicators of the body *detecting* thought from its linked spirit!"

"Very good!" the fake Loki congratulated enthusiastically. "I knew you could understand. You're reasonably clever - for a Midgardian."

The Tony put a hand to its chest, blushing in a way the real Tony had never done in his entire *life*, in a goddamn eternity of Thursdays. "Oh, Loki, do you really think so?"

Tony pulled one of his cufflinks off as the Loki illusion gave some sickening response. He tossed the cufflink at the illusions and they dispelled with a shimmer.

"Well, that was a horrifying glimpse into your thought process," he said out loud.

Loki looked at the cufflink on the floor, and then at Tony, with a suspiciously satisfied smirk.

"Interesting that you decided to throw something at what you knew were insubstantial illusions."

Tony paused, but he didn't see what was weird about that. "Yeah? You said... the fabric, whatever, of the universe resists them. They should be easily disruptable, right? Because of the complexity in having the space not respond as if the objects were really there."

Loki's smirk broadened. "So you generated a theory based on magical principles. Rather than physical ones."

...Huh. How about that.

"It's been a lot of Thursdays," Tony said with a straight face. "I mean, I'm losing my mind a little, we both know that."

Loki didn't smile. Actually, Loki's smirk slipped a little, and his eyes slid away from Tony's, like he didn't really want to acknowledge it. Tony sighed.

"Way to make it awkward," he muttered, and went to pick his cufflink up. "Well, since apparently I'm actually learning something out of all this, should we keep going?"

"Yes," Loki said, then cleared his throat. "Yes, by all means."

--

One of the versions where Loki had pulled his resigned-and-dignified act a bunch, and not thrown any tantrums (which was maybe a little more than Tony could say for himself), Tony swallowed his pride and actually asked about that.

"Got any tips for this whole... unexpectedly balanced psyche you're sporting?"

Loki paused. He looked distantly into the air, clearly thinking about it. After a few moments, his lips curled in a faint, self-deprecating sort of smile and he said, "I broke a lot of things. Then I went to Jotunheim and got stabbed... a number of times."

"Not sounding appealing, so far," Tony said.

Loki glanced at him, corner of his mouth curling a little more. "I had some rather intense arguments with the All-Father. And, eventually I accepted that the Norns clearly don't want me dead just yet. Which suggests there is a... a reason, for my existence." He glanced away. "It means I'm not an accident of fate, or a cruel mistake. I think, in his own way, the All-Father might even have loved me."

"Oh," Tony said. "Good. Closure. That's... that's good advice. Excellent." He picked up the nearest object - a spanner, as it happened - then didn't know what to do with it, and flipped it aimlessly in his hand.

Smashing it against someone's head seemed like it might be satisfying, except that he wasn't sure the people he wanted to smash with it had ever actually existed. The idea that time had worked differently for a while and then just *changed* was starting to seem more and more far-fetched.

Loki said wryly, "Do you want to put your armor on and destroy pieces of the city again?"

"Yes," Tony said, and put the spanner down again. "That's an even better idea. Jarvis!"

So, okay, fighting Loki *without* killing each other was a decent way to spend an afternoon. Having already learned how to do the most damage to each other, that meant they knew what to avoid. Cutting and stabbing were bad; if the suit only took impact damage, the gel cushioning spared Tony the worst of it. Bruises were fine. It was weirdly satisfying, even. Made him feel achy and hot and... kind of like the tattooing, endorphin rush.

There was a hell of a power trip in the amount of damage they could wreak, just the two of them. That could be kind of fun to explore, a version where they played supervillain to see what they could do when they really put their minds to it.

Tony pulled his helmet off and sprawled against the wreckage of something that looked like it had started the version as a white car. He was sweaty and buzzing and pleasantly numb. He was vaguely aware of Loki coming to perch beside him, but didn't pay too much attention until he felt a touch on his head. He jerked reflexively and started to look up.

Loki made a shushing sound and-- oh, okay, the guy was playing with his hair, yeah *that* wasn't weird. Or gross, considering how much sweat was soaked in there right now. Tony gave a mental shrug and let it happen. He was too exhausted to care that much. Plus, it... was actually kind of nice. Gentle, nudging touches, soothing their way over his scalp and at the nape of his neck.

"Thanks," he muttered, letting his eyes close.

Loki gave a quiet hum but didn't say anything. His hand was still on Tony's neck, probably resting

on the back of the armor's collar bearing.

Tony could feel a pulse, where Loki's thumb pressed against the side of his neck, but he wasn't quite sure whether it was Loki's or his own.

--

The holographic interface was switched on and Tony was using his lightpen to doodle an ouroboros, thinking about cycles of time and consciousness being hosted somewhere outside the body. The second part would at least explain how his body could reset yet a part of him remember previous versions, although he wondered if that meant that the brain 'updated' as soon as it reset.

He couldn't set anything up to scan it because the equipment would be gone as soon as the reset occurred. That was annoying.

"Is that the serpent?" Loki asked, coming up behind him. Must have been 10:03. "I don't recall mentioning it."

"Mentioning what?" Tony asked, adding a little droplet of blood where one fang was sinking into the snake's tail.

"On Jotunheim, they call the cycle of time a serpent." Loki reached out to play with the projected light. "A great mythical beast named Jormungandr which consumes itself eternally. Is that not what this is?"

Huh. "Actually pretty similar," Tony admitted, looking at his sketch for a moment, with Loki's fingers waving through it. "Ouroboros. Alchemical symbol, originally Egyptian I think. Lots of infinity and renewal type stuff."

Loki made a small sound of acknowledgement and shifted his fingers. The sketched snake let go of its tail and slid onto Loki's hand, still glowing as it made its way up his arm.

Tony laughed. "Show-off," he accused, and Loki grinned without denying it.

Tony watched the snake for a moment longer, then nudged his chair around to face Loki more fully. "So, let's say your... spirit or consciousness or whatever you want to call it is outside your body."

Loki grimaced. "Not *outside*, it's more... parallel."

"Yeah, that clears it right up," Tony muttered sarcastically. "Sure, parallel, fine. Is that where you cast magic from? Or does magic use, uh, the equivalent of muscles, something like that."

Loki perked up, like he always did when it seemed like Tony was actually taking magic seriously, and dispelled the serpent illusion. "Ah, a little of both, actually. It is initiated in the mind - your 'consciousness'. If you were to draw only on astral energy that is all you would need. But if you wish to draw on energy stored in your body, obviously your body must have involvement; you couldn't do it from the Astral Plane."

"Right." That... could be interpreted as making a certain amount of sense. Didn't give Tony a great feel for what levels of energy they were dealing with, though. "What about the time thing, what sort of energy did you use for that?"

Loki gave a short, unhappy laugh. "For that, I drew on an object of great power held in Asgard's vault. I can bring it here if we need it, though I would rather have as little to do with it as possible.

Many of the relics Odin collected are... unsafe."

"Unstable?" Tony asked, curious about the expression on Loki's face.

After a moment's thought, Loki answered, "Strong-willed. They have their own desires, and cannot be trusted not to turn on the one who attempts to wield them." He gave a small, hard smirk. "Truly, I fit right in."

"Please," Tony scoffed playfully. "You're a marshmallow."

Loki raised his eyebrows, incredulous. "A *what*?"

Tony pushed up out of his chair and patted Loki on the chest. "A big softie. All heart and cuddles. I mean, by Slytherin standards, obviously, but the point stands."

Loki grabbed him by the forearms, apparently unimpressed by the patting, but it was a fairly gentle grab. Much lighter than Loki was capable of when he forgot how his strength compared to a human's. It hit Tony suddenly, how careful and restrained Loki must be, all the time, when touching him. Perfectly controlled.

"It has been a long time since anyone accused me of having *heart*," Loki said in a low voice.

Tony looked up at him, increasingly aware of their closeness, of Loki's hands wrapped around his arms. He remembered the version he'd come out of the shower to find Loki sprawled on his bed and dragging eyes over his body. This was... this had potential.

"Follow-up question," he said, not trying to pull away from Loki's hold. Loki just raised an eyebrow, waiting for the question.

Tony let his mouth curl into a dirty smirk. "You have the concept of hate-sex on Asgard?"

Loki pushed him against the edge of the workstation, and Tony grunted at the impact on the back of his hips. He could feel Loki's hands sliding up to his wrists, and then pinning them together.

"How detailed a demonstration would you like?" Loki asked, practically *purred*, returning his smirk.

"I think you broke my back," Tony said, wincing at the sharp, spasming line of pain from the table's edge.

"Answer the question," Loki told him, voice dropping to an impatient growl. He was leaning in close, holding Tony's wrists up between them with one hand and the other hand giving a firm squeeze to Tony's hip. There was something powerful about being under the focus of all that leashed intensity. In retrospect, Tony couldn't believe how long it had taken him to put 'having sex with an alien' on the list of things to try out.

"Ah - yeah," he said raggedly. "Don't skimp on the detail."

Loki gave a satisfied grin, eyes glittering, and leaned down the last little bit to kiss Tony hard. Tony wrenched a hand free to grab the side of Loki's waist, using it as leverage to push up into the kiss. He was determined to give as good as he got. Loki didn't smell like an alien, Loki smelled-- well, like a guy. Warm. Good.

Loki let go of his other wrist, but it turned out that was only to get a better grip on him. "You just want to delay your magic lessons," Loki muttered, hitching Tony up against his hips.

Tony managed a little laugh, then a groan as Loki pushed him on top of the bench and pressed in close. Effortlessly manhandling Tony however he wanted him and wow, that was inappropriately hot. Turned out Asgardian strength was good for more than just punting people through walls.

Sex with an alien; *definitely* on the list to try without consequences--

--except it wasn't, Tony realized with a lurch. It felt like his heart skipping a beat, only in his stomach. This was the only thing *with* consequences, Loki was the only other person who would *remember*. He sucked in a ragged breath, flushing hot all of a sudden. His heart pounded too hard for him to properly catch his breath. What-- he didn't even remember what playing for real stakes felt like.

His hands tightened on Loki's waist; his fingers dug into the supple leather. He could feel Loki nipping at the line of his jaw, light and teasing. Tony hooked his legs around Loki's, chasing every inch of contact. He felt loose in his skin, molten and heavy-limbed. This... this would last. This *mattered*.

"Come on," he panted, grinding their hips together. God. He was a little embarrassed to realize he was shaking. He just-- needed. Something solid, something he could hold onto, something that proved the world still existed and he wasn't just locked in his own head crazy in a ward somewhere--

Loki gave another one of those impatient growls, squeezing just too-tight enough to be the right kind of painful. Tony let his head fall back, moaning; let Loki maneuver him however he wanted; let, let, let; let Loki bring change and variety and memory and *new*.

As a bonus, it turned out they definitely had hate-sex on Asgard.

--

"Good morning, sir. It's seven a.m., Thursday fourteenth. The weather in New York City is thirty-five degrees and clear, with an expected high of fifty-four."

Tony shifted and rolled onto his back. He stared upwards without really focusing on anything. His bed was warm and comfortable. None of his muscles hurt. He wasn't bruised. Nothing felt like he'd been touched at all.

"I'm starting to really not appreciate mornings," he said out loud. And because he'd said that in other versions, he could mouth along with Jarvis' response, word-for-word.

"You do seem to prefer approaching them from the other side, sir."

"I wouldn't know," Tony muttered. Extensive clock-watching had gotten him to 4:17 a.m. on the fifteenth. Apparently that was when the loop reset or collapsed or did whatever it did because no matter how much coffee he drank or how intently he watched, he'd never seen 4:18. Existence-wise, it didn't seem to be part of the universe. (Anymore? Unclear.)

He lay there for a while, feeling... he wasn't sure how he felt. Parameters undefined. Something reluctant under his skin.

He should get up. Go down to the lab and research or... revise one of the probably five million hobbies he was constantly forgetting how to do. When Loki arrived...

Good morning, sir, it's Thursday fourteenth, he thought to himself, and what if Loki just showed up with the same snide comment and none of it happened, nothing he did existed, he didn't *exist*--

It took a moment for Tony to realize how still he was holding himself. He shuddered and took a breath, in and out. In, out. Breathe.

He was being ridiculous. Loki would remember because that was the entire point of Loki, to be Tony's counterpart, the other force that influenced how each version played out. It was just-- He was just being ridiculous. He was going to get up, and go down to the workshop, and stop being such a drama queen.

Tony's fingers flexed against the sheets. Well... maybe he didn't need to go to the workshop right away. He could shower, sometimes he showered first, that was a perfectly legitimate morning thing. It wasn't like he accrued sweat or grime but the hot water felt good and sometimes he was in the mood to play with suds...

Tony wiped a hand over his face, called himself a coward under his breath, and then went to take a shower.

It felt great for a while. Until he thought about turning off the shower, and then he got a throat full of steam and couldn't catch his breath. It was-- there was soap in his eyes, or shampoo - it stung like hell. He thumped the shower wall and swore. Ignored the trembling of his hands.

Fuck. "You're fucking ridiculous," he told himself, voice thick from the hot water. He closed his eyes and put his face right in the spray, hoping the pounding water would drive away the white noise buzzing in his mind. Water running down his face. Dripping from his hair.

Adrenaline burst in him from out of nowhere and-- he was choking on it. He couldn't *breathe*. There was too much. Just... water everywhere. In his throat. In his nose. It burned. There was so much steam. Why couldn't he breathe. His lungs hurt. His chest hurt. There was something *in* there. He needed to get it out, but he didn't know what it was.

He doubled over, trying to gasp. No *air*. He scraped desperately at his chest. If he could get it out, he'd be okay. Somehow he knew if he could dig it out - but he couldn't find anything. *Shit*.

On his knees. Curled right over. Water on the ground and drenched and gasping. *Shit, shit*. He scrabbled at his chest. His fingernails were digging in. He couldn't find it. Where was it. He had to get it out. Had to breathe. He slammed his hands against the ground. Couldn't get enough air to scream. Slammed his hands again. Tears were streaming from his eyes. He dropped his face to the wet tile. Tried-- he *needed*-- just one. Just one breath, fuck, *please*--

He could hear an awful, whooping, wheezing sound but nothing was coming in. His chest was locked. He was trapped. He couldn't breathe. His stomach was clenched up tight. He couldn't stop crying. His head spun. He was so dizzy he thought he might be sick. At least he was already on the ground.

He didn't know... how long it lasted. After a while he wasn't gasping quite so desperately. His throat ached, and the rest of his body felt exhausted.

That was fine. Tony wasn't in a hurry to move. He was more than willing to stay slumped in the bottom of his shower. He breathed greedily through his mouth, getting reacquainted with oxygen.

Eventually, Tony dragged himself up far enough to turn the water off. He shifted his legs and sat for a moment, leaning against the wall. His nose was all snotted up and his eyes burned.

Glancing at his hand, he rubbed his thumb over the pruned fingertips. Yeah... okay. Little too long in the shower. And scratches on his chest. Sharp red lines; he'd torn skin.

What... oh. Electromagnet, right? Powered by a miniature arc reactor? Or he'd dreamed that. No, he was sure-- because that was something to do with Iron Man, the armor. There were versions of it made to connect to a power source in the chest.

A little unsteadily, he pulled himself up and got out of the shower. The mirror was completely fogged over. Hell, the whole bathroom was basically fogged over, the amount of steam that lingered in the air.

He fumbled a bathroom drawer open and found some tissues to blow all the crud out of his nose. He'd given himself a sinus headache and he really wanted to just go back to sleep.

Whatever. He snagged a towel and did a half-assed job of wiping it over his skin. It didn't really matter if he got back in bed still damp. He wiped his nose on the towel and dropped it on the floor, then trudged tiredly back into his bedroom.

Where Loki was lying on his bed, looking blankly at the ceiling. All black leather, no cape or horns. Tony blinked. Relief made him feel oddly light, but also... he was still really tired. And Loki only showed up at 10:03, was it that late already? His sense of everything was off, this morning. This version of it.

Loki didn't turn his head, but a sour expression curled across his face. "Scrubbing off the taint?"

"What," Tony said blearily, and regretted it when his throat remembered it hurt. Still, he couldn't make Loki's words make sense in his head.

Forget it. He shook his head and took the extra steps to the bed. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said, shoving at the covers to crawl halfway in, "but I'm exhausted. School's postponed 'til after lunch."

"You don't eat lunch," Loki said, glancing at him with an odd expression. Then Loki's eyebrows furrowed and he pushed up onto one arm, looking at Tony's chest.

Right. Tony grimaced. "I used to have a thing," he said, half-mumbling. "Like the one downstairs. Smaller, obviously."

"Like an-- In your *body*?"

The expression on Loki's face did not bode well for Tony getting to sleep any time soon.

Tony sighed heavily. His sinuses hurt, around and behind his eyes. "Yes. I'm pretty sure. But it reset, I guess. Look, not that I'm not loving show and tell, but--"

Loki held up a hand for silence, like *Tony* was the one dragging on the conversation. Tony rolled his eyes and tugged his pillow down slightly, under his wet hair. Blegh. He probably should have put a little more effort into toweling off.

He lay there drowsily for a bit, eyes only half-closed because he suspected if he actually dozed off Loki would wake him with some kind of nasty jump-scare. Then there was a rustling sound and some dim movement.

"I need to-- That is, may I take a look?" Loki said carefully.

Tony squinted at him, then at Loki's hand hovering over his scratched chest. For some reason he thought of the reactor downstairs, and Loki blowing them both up. "Uh. Define 'look'."

"I can... call on your body's memory..." Loki trailed off, focusing on Tony's chest.

Tony waited to see if there was any more to that sentence, and then he realized that Loki's face wasn't his concentrating face. Or, it had started out that way, but something in the tension around Loki's eyes was starting to look more and more like an alarmed face.

And then Loki pulled his hand back and stared at it like he didn't understand why it would be so cruel to him, and Tony figured his own face was probably getting a bit alarmed.

"Why isn't it working," Loki murmured.

Oh, was *that* all? Broken magic, okay. Tony relaxed. "Well, hey. Performance issues, I hear some guys have that problem, not uncommon really."

Loki gave him a look like he was a particularly strange puzzle. Tony had been expecting a more defensive reaction - for some reason his mind thought of broken glass. Instead Loki glanced away, then looked back only to pull the covers the rest of the way over Tony's chest.

"Thorn in my side," Loki murmured, sounding irritated. "Go back to sleep, little mortal. I'll be down in your workshop if you're ready for lessons later."

"Can I just say, it's weirding me out that you're basically tucking me in," Tony said.

Loki gave a small huff but it didn't sound too annoyed. Tony watched him leave before finally closing his eyes.

--

When Tony eventually made his way to the workshop, Loki was looking at a schematic of the miniaturized arc reactor.

"That's a sealed file," Tony said with some annoyance. He was clutching a half-empty bottle of flavored water.

Loki glanced at him only briefly. "This device is what blocked the scepter I used, when I brought the Chitauri here?"

Scepter. It stirred up vague memories. Pointy stick, big glowy engagement rock in the sharp part. Ye-es, mind control stick, creepy. It hadn't worked on him. "I think so, yeah."

"But you no longer have it," Loki said, although he was clearly talking *at* Tony rather than to him, now. "And even if its protection lingered, there should not have been anything to resist, it still doesn't explain..."

Tony drank some of his water, not sure what to make of Loki's reaction - or lack of reaction - to his little freak-out. It was a prime opportunity for mockery, which seemed like one of Loki's favorite hobbies... but instead Loki was acting strangely thoughtful and serious.

Loki sighed and closed the file. He turned, straightening, and looked Tony over with an unreadable expression.

Tony squared his shoulders a little, irritated with himself. He hadn't known he even *could* get embarrassed anymore. What did he care what Loki thought, anyway? They weren't- friends, they were just working together to fix time or whatever the hell was happening. "So are we on magic or physics this afternoon?"

"Neither," Loki said. "I tire of these walls."

Tony flinched despite himself, anxiety rising in his throat. Loki leaving meant versions and versions alone and uncertain, trying to figure out how much he'd dreamed up inside his own head. "Don't-- You don't have to-- I can get in some entertainment, what do you want, dancing girls, performance art, mobile petting zoo? I can make it happen."

"What is a petting-- never mind." Loki shimmered briefly, casual Asgardian leathers changing to a well-fitted black suit. "I have explored much of the Nine Realms, bar Midgard. Magic and physics will both still exist if we take a stroll outdoors."

Tony caught the plural pronoun and stuck on it, startled. "We?"

"Of course," Loki told him, with that familiar, exasperated tone that implied Tony was woefully slow on the uptake. "I have a Midgardian guide at my disposal, it would hardly make sense to leave you behind. Besides, it would do us both good to be among other people for a while."

Tony took a slow breath in and let it out before following Loki to the elevator. 'We'. 'Us'. This was how Loki was going to react, then: not make fun of Tony, but drag him away from the workshop to take a break and interact with the repetitive outside world.

"Called it," he said out loud, ignoring the slight roughness of his voice. "Marshmallow."

Loki smirked, with a hint of genuine amusement. "Now that hardly sounds like me. I must have some ulterior motive."

Tony grinned back. "Oh, yeah. I'm sure it's really fiendish."

"I've an inclination to sample Midgardian foods." Loki tilted his head, watching the elevator doors. "You will lead me to an appropriate eatery nearby."

Simple enough. "You sure you don't want the dancing girls? It's not too late to make that happen."

Loki gave an inelegant snort. "Perhaps another time."

When the elevator hit ground level, Tony's instinct was to use his private exit, but Loki had already turned to go through the lobby. Tony jogged to catch up, with a casual wave of acknowledgement to Katie and Lindsey as they passed Reception.

Come to think of it, aside from that version they went out and smashed a bunch of Manhattan, they *had* pretty much been cooped up inside the workshop. The light outside was bright and sharp; Tony reached for his pocket, then realized he didn't have any sunglasses with him. Or a warm enough jacket. Damn. He shivered at the chill of the air.

"Here," Loki said, passing him a rich green scarf. "Which way?"

"Left," Tony answered, wrapping the scarf around his neck as he set off. The ends of it were tasseled. It *felt* real, and soft and warm. According to the rules of magic, Loki had conjured it by rewriting the bit of air between his hands as wool. Which completely flew in the face of conservation of mass and energy, but... in a fantasy novel, sure.

Tony wondered if the fact that he could only deal with magic if he pretended it was fictional was why he couldn't do any of it himself. If Loki was right that there was some sort of latent ability in him, then psychological barriers might be the issue.

"Explored the realms, huh," Tony said as they wound their way through other pedestrians. "Find anything interesting?"

Loki made a contemplative noise. "I saw some famous sights. Stirred up a bit of trouble. Visited a *lot* of sorceresses and mages. And Jotunheim, of course." He grimaced, shoulders hunching inward a little. "I saw the damage I had done to that world and the destruction I caused. And before you ask, yes, I do regret it."

Tony raised an eyebrow, more to himself than to Loki. "Uh, I don't actually know what you did, but I appreciate the sentiment, I think."

"Ah." Loki pursed his lips in thought for a moment. "Do you recall the Bifrost?"

Mostly Tony recalled reading SHIELD files about it during various hacking sessions, but close enough. He knew what it was. "Yes."

"I turned it on Jotunheim and locked it in position, at full strength. My intention was to destroy the realm and all its inhabitants." Loki's eyes were fixed on the sidewalk ahead. "I thought this would prove my loyalty to Asgard, prove I belonged there, that I was truly one of them. Instead it marked the end of any pretense of acceptance I had once had."

Tony thought about the energy recordings SHIELD had and whistled softly. The destructive potential... dear god. That was the WMD to end all WMDs. The sort of thing he could only dream about designing.

But the way Loki was talking, Jotunheim was still there. Tony glanced up at him. "What stopped it?"

"You can't guess?" Loki said wryly. "Thor. He destroyed the Bifrost rather than see Jotunheim destroyed. At the time, I could not understand why he would prevent something he had desired his whole life. I presumed it to be spite, that he could not bear for me to be the one who finally defeated our ancient foe." There were almost audible quote marks around that last part. "I think I understand somewhat better, now."

Ancient foes and rules of magic, wiping out entire realms. It *felt* like something out of a fantasy book. Tony couldn't quite wrap his mind around it. Then again, Manhattan wasn't exactly a magic realm, and trying to destroy Manhattan didn't feel very real either.

The people on the sidewalk with them, they were all pre-programmed, limited. It didn't matter what he did, they'd be back the next version, repeating the same movements.

"Tell me something about Jotunheim."

"It is cold," Loki said softly, "too cold for mortals to bear. But beautiful, in its own way. Great caverns in shades of blue and white, with elaborate pillars, and colored layers where strange dusts have been trapped in the ice. The animals above the surface are fierce, and usually hungry. Their life is not a kind or gentle one."

"Above the surface?"

Loki smiled, a small one like he didn't realize he was doing it. "There are vast seas hidden under a frozen surface, teeming with the strangest of creatures. I have not learned much of them, yet. My focus was more on learning about the people I came from."

"Oh," Tony said, startled. Some of the things Loki had said in different versions made more sense,

suddenly. "You're... adopted, right? I didn't realize-- from a whole different realm. Oh, and they're Asgard's enemies. Good heavens, no wonder you were so fucked up."

Loki chuckled a little darkly. "Indeed. It turns out that Jotuns are no more or less monstrous than Asgardians. Barring their desserts, which are truly vile."

Tony just about choked on his own laughter.

They settled into a small bistro that had kind of average food but wasn't too crowded. Tony asked a few more questions about Jotunheim. He got briefly excited when Loki said they looked different to Asgardians and humans, but then Loki showed him and it turned out that all 'different' meant was bluer skin and a couple of raised markings. That was low-budget scifi levels of alien make-up, and Tony said so out loud.

Loki shrugged one shoulder. "Slight differences, perhaps, but we were raised to consider them extremely significant. Your cultures have been known to do similar, on Midgard, have they not?"

When put that way, Tony kind of had to concede the point.

When the conversation swung towards magic, he remembered to ask about the thing Loki had tried to do earlier, something about memory of the arc reactor. He gestured for more coffee at the same time.

"Things that spend much time together become... intertwined," Loki said. "There are impressions left behind."

Tony leaned forward, struck by something in the wording Loki used. "Wait. Like quantum entanglement?"

"...Yes," Loki said in surprise, after pausing to think. "There should be traces of the device in the... information it exchanged with the cells of your body. I could find nothing, though. Your body holds no memory of any state it may have been in prior to the start of this day."

That sounded a lot like confirmation of Tony's fears. "So that's all there is," he said, unease gnawing at his stomach. "Time is just morning to night, repeat, and any memories we think we have are created along with the buildings and bodies and--"

"No," Loki interrupted a little sharply. "That is, the cycle is *currently* collapsed, but it was not always that way. There was more, and it can be restored. We will find a way."

Tony fixed his eyes on Loki's, trying to understand the surety he saw there. "How do you know?" he demanded. "How can you *know*?"

Loki exhaled slowly, studying him. Their coffees arrived before Tony got any answer; he waved off the "And is there anything else--?" with more than a little irritation.

"I fear I cannot give you an answer that will satisfy you," Loki finally said, quiet and serious. "I must ask that you trust me - and I am well aware you have little reason to do so."

Tony wrapped his hands around his coffee cup, staring down at the surface of the drink.

"For now, this day repeats. But it was not always thus, nor will it always remain." Loki reached across the table and physically lifted Tony's chin, startling him into eye contact. "Trust me in this. While it does, I will return."

Tony felt his heart thump disproportionately hard. He searched Loki's face, seeing only sincerity and determination. "Even when I call you names and insult your beliefs about the universe?"

Loki gave a brief eyeroll and a small smile. "There is a saying on Jotunheim-- Well, in two of the three major languages, at least. It is about the icicle that pierces one's skin in battle. An annoyance, like you on Midgard speak of thorns."

"Thorn in your side," Tony echoed, narrowing his eyes at Loki.

"Yes. But the icicle that pierces your skin becomes part of your own defenses." Loki held up a hand and it shifted blue as a blade of ice extended out from Loki's fingers. "Apparently many Jotun relationships have... conflicted beginnings." He smirked, giving his hand a shake to discard the ice, then gave Tony a lightly mocking look. "I find I have become somewhat accustomed to your company."

Tony rolled his eyes, but couldn't quite suppress his own smile. "Marshmallow, you say the sweetest things."

#

How Many Infinite Variations Does It Take to Walk into a Bar

Chapter Summary

More magic! More physics! And... horses.

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the lateness of this chapter, I've been unwell.

"Good morning, sir. It's seven a.m., Thursday fourteenth. The weather in New York City is thirty-five degrees and clear, with an expected high of fifty-four."

Hold all calls, cancel all reminders. Practice some inane skill. Sometimes, Tony tried to meditate, tried to figure out the mind-state Loki said was how mages accessed the universe. He never felt anything. He was the one who'd insisted he didn't need to *do* magic to understand it, so he always made sure to stop his attempts well before Loki's arrival at 10:03.

Loki had them change up their pattern. For every four versions they spent studying, the next version was spent 'exploring Midgard'. There was a haughty excuse about Loki not wanting his mind to calcify, but Tony was getting better at reading between the lines. Loki: violent alien outside with a gooey marshmallow center (and yes, Tony had absolutely said that out loud so he could follow up with an oral sex innuendo/offer, because he still had priorities).

At first Tony tried to pick places that might impress Loki, but he realized quickly enough that nothing impressed Loki. There was always bigger, better, more elaborate somewhere else in the Nine Realms. Even the freaking *Bermuda Triangle* got a comparison to some mysterious region of space that Loki said was called the Shadow Nebula.

Tony switched tactics. Loki had dropped a comment about the stables on Asgard, going there to groom horses when he was trying to delay being found after a prank. The slight wistfulness of his description had given Tony the idea, and the next version they were due to spend 'exploring' Tony was ready with a location.

Loki took them through space without question. When they arrived at the ranch, the smell of hay and horseshit was prominent. Loki inhaled deeply then laughed with a joy that wasn't usually so open.

"Nice to see you happy without making anything explode," Tony teased.

"You like a good bit of chaos as much as I," Loki retorted, but he kept smiling, and didn't even say anything insulting to the rancher when they went inside to go over the ground rules.

Tony wasn't a big fan of horse-riding, personally. Too much handing over control. He could barely stand to be a passenger in a car someone else was driving; it had to be someone he knew well, and horses didn't make the cut.

Seeing Loki introduced to the horses though - Loki all bright-eyed and boyish excitement - that was cute. Tony leaned on a wooden post, watching Loki run appreciative hands over a humongous horse that was kind of a dirty gray color. That was another reason not to be a big fan of horse-riding - some of those animals were built like *tanks*, and Tony knew a thing or two about tanks.

Loki made friends with the gray horse and saddled up, then trotted off with one of the guys who worked there. (Obviously it was a supervised ride, they weren't exactly going to give a stranger free rein - heh, so to speak - no matter what size check Tony Stark wrote out.)

Tony hung around the house and tried to teach himself how to lasso a wooden post, with a little assistance from the internet. Learning the throw wasn't so bad; it was the fancier bits, like getting the loop to lengthen in the air, that were more of a struggle. As the day wore on he had to take longer and longer breaks, his arm getting more and more exhausted.

At least Loki came back just as he made a really excellent throw. Tony gave a cocky smirk and pretended they were reliably that good and he hadn't just fluked it. This... was something that was going to take a lot more practice. It was pretty cool, though.

"Nicely done," Loki said, dismounting with an ease that Tony was a little envious of.

"Thanks. Good to know when my arm drops off its sacrifice wasn't wasted."

"We'll remember it with honor," Loki teased, while loosening the horse's gear a bit. "Yes, come now, Six String, let's have a drink and a nice groom, mm?"

Tony coiled up the rope he'd been using and tagged along at a safe distance behind Loki and the ranch-hand and their giant giant horses. He was still kind of thinking about rope and trajectories while the others dealt with the horses, but he zoned back in in time to get distracted watching Loki rub a brush in firm, brisk circles over the gray horse's coat. Loki's hands, specifically. Something about the strength and confidence of them... yeah, Tony could appreciate that.

The natural follow-up to thinking about Loki's hands was thinking about Loki's hands on him, and then Tony realized that Loki should definitely learn to tattoo, because combining sex with that hazy-headed endorphin space would be *amazing*.

"What was that?"

Tony blinked, unsure why Loki was looking at him. "I didn't say anything."

"I know; what were you thinking about?" Loki kept facing him, only shooting little sideways glances to keep track of where he was brushing.

"Sex, obviously." Tony gave a small half-smirk. "You're not going to convince me you're a mind-reader by guessing *that*."

Loki paused to give the horse an apologetic pat, then stepped closer to Tony. "Something else. There was a flicker of energy - your energy. You almost had it."

Energy-- what, magic? Tony stared up at Loki incredulously. "Uh, no, you distinctly said I needed some kind of meditate-y out-of-body experience. Just now I was thinking about being sky-high on endorphins which is about the most *in* my body I've ever been in my life, it's like one hundred percent body, that is the exact *opposite*-- Are you kidding me? It's the complete opposite of what you told me to do!"

The ranch-hand was asking what kind of hippies they were, and they both ignored him with long

practice at ignoring people who would remember none of this if they ever met again.

"It's not the opposite," Loki insisted, scowling a little. "Just because you Midgardians are hopelessly out of touch with your own energies, you assume the fault lies in my instructions."

"Just because you're hoity-toity, you assume the fault lies in Midgardians," Tony shot right back. He could play these games all day (and they had before; ridiculous verbal accusations back and forth until neither could remember what they were even arguing about).

"Well, I'm usually right," Loki retorted with a grin, then attempted to look disapproving. "You know, this is supposed to be a rest day."

"We rested," Tony said, gesturing around at the horses and the hay and the increasingly grumpy ranch-hand. "Come on. Energy flicker. What are we talking, like, little flicker? Big, bigger flicker? Give me an idea, here."

Loki sighed in mock-exasperation. "All right, then." He grasped Tony's hand and took them both back through space.

They wound up in Tony's bedroom instead of the workshop, which was a slight surprise. Tony cocked his head and considered waggling his eyebrows. "Well, not quite what I meant, but I can work with this."

"This will be easier if you lie down, to start with."

"As the actress said to the bishop," Tony murmured. He pulled his shoes off first, then lay on the bed and grinned up at Loki. "Hey, marshmallow. Wanna show me your gooey center?"

"If you start spouting nonsense about enclosing me in crackers - again - I'll leave you to your starvation madness." Loki sat on the edge of the bed. "Now, close your eyes and concentrate on those... endorphins."

"S'mores," Tony muttered absently as he complied. "Should take you camping."

--

It took a lot of practice and several visits to tattoo parlors before Tony could reliably switch on that thrumming, hyper-sensitized mind-state. It wasn't a hundred percent and it wasn't always fast, but he could usually get there. Even then, it didn't help him much. Loki said his energy was 'active', whatever the hell that meant, but he couldn't figure out how to do anything with it.

Despite all the books and the theory he'd studied, the most he could do was feel a weird disturbance when Loki 'reached' out invisibly to mess with him. It was... frustrating. Tony wasn't used to having to work so hard to learn how to do something.

"Fuck it," he said one version, after wasting an hour completely failing to extinguish a candle with his mind. "Time out. I'm calling time out for the rest of this go-round. I need to vent some frustration."

"Do you want to blow up Manhattan again?" Loki said, mostly teasing but also from the sounds of it genuinely offering.

After a moment's thought, Tony shook his head. "Bigger. I'm talking large-scale expressions of feelings. Let's go invade a country. I already know how to take down all the world leaders."

Loki gave a low, dark laugh. "You are wasted on Midgard, icicle. Very well, then. Did you have a country in mind, or did you want to toss a dart at a map?"

"You make 'country' sound like such a dirty word," Tony said with a grin. "I don't know, surprise me."

Their spontaneous invasion of Macao didn't go terribly well, but it made Tony feel a lot better, and it kicked off a new tradition. Whenever Tony was fed up, or neither of them had a particularly appealing idea for how to spend a non-study version, they played either superhero or supervillain, alternating between the two.

It was hard to say which was more fun, actually; they both loved the applause, but there was something so *satisfying* about a good explosion. Whether people were cheering or cowering in fear, when it came down to it, it boiled down to the same thing. Power.

Sure, it was fleeting and illusory. Every version ended; the day would start over, reset, with no traces of any dramatics except for what lingered in Tony's and Loki's memories. But for a few short hours each time, it was nice to feel like they had power over something.

--

Tony could learn as many things as he wanted, but if he didn't occasionally practice them they didn't *stay* learned. This particular version, he was revising Bengali, so at 10:03 it seemed logical to greet Loki in Bengali to be a bit of an ass. Loki didn't even hesitate before responding, in what sounded like English but, Tony realized, probably wasn't.

"Hey... am I remembering right that you and Thor speak some kind of..." He waved his hands near his head. "Telepathic magic translation? You don't speak English, do you. That wouldn't make any sense, it would be a totally different language than when you started learning it as kids."

"All-Speak," Loki agreed. "You hear my meaning in the tongue most familiar to you."

"Trust me, that's not the tongue most familiar to me," Tony said with a leer, because that was too easy a shot to pass up. Then something else occurred to him. "So, when that book is getting all smug about how Asgardian mages don't need special chants to communicate with the universe, that's only because you do all your communicating by 'intent' anyway."

Loki opened his mouth, cocked his head, and closed his mouth again. After a moment he said, "Ah."

Tony raised his eyebrows.

"You're right," Loki admitted. "That... hadn't occurred to me. It wasn't something I ever spent much thought on, to be honest. That may explain why you haven't had any success."

"That's just great," Tony said with a brief roll of his eyes. It was weird to feel both annoyed and relieved at the same time. Maybe not that weird. "I don't suppose you know any of the fancy words or chants, then."

Loki grimaced a little. "I'm afraid not. I'll have a look in the palace library. To seek out a tutor, persuade them, and bring them here would take up a great deal of the time we have each day."

Tony shrugged, pretending he didn't feel a tug of disappointment in his gut. "Like I said, I don't need to *do* magic to learn the theory."

"I wonder if it would be possible to grant you All-Speak," Loki mused.

That was an option? Huh. Apparently that was an option. It would make all the time Tony had spent learning new languages kind of a waste, but since none of that time existed (or something like that) it was kind of wasted anyway. "Would that work? Is it a learned skill thing or a body thing? I mean, am I just going to wake up in a fresh version with my petty mortal voice-box reset?"

Loki looked at him with an expression that was far more serious than Tony really thought the question warranted. "I think... it would be worth finding out."

Tony frowned uneasily. "You're still a little over-dramatic, you know that, right?"

Loki looked at him a moment longer then the corners of his mouth quirked up. "Oh, have no fear, Midgardian. I'm capable of being far, far more dramatic than this."

Typical. Tony snorted and let the topic go, instead waving Loki over to the screen where the next set of physics readings were set up and ready.

--

By 10:16, Tony was starting to panic.

Not *panic* panic, he wasn't hyperventilating (yet), but he was pretty damned tense. Loki had promised, in the bistro, Loki had promised he would show up for each version, Tony hadn't imagined that. But Loki wasn't here and it was thirteen minutes past time, no, now it was fourteen minutes past time, *why was the version wrong?*

The worst part was that Tony *remembered* Loki saying he'd go to the palace library... but apparently that very mundane explanation didn't mean anything to the part of his brain that was *convinced* something about time had gone horribly wrong.

Again.

He tried to practice getting into the right frame of mind for magic, but tense as he was it kept slipping out of reach. He tried to distract himself by replaying the video call to Rhodey he'd done in... a lot of the earlier versions actually, it put a smile on his face - except the tension he was feeling must have been obvious because Rhodey diverted from script to ask what was going on and Tony sighed and gave up on that idea.

He was giving himself a headache and making himself exhausted. He went up to the bar and poured a glass of scotch. Stared out the window while he drank it, watching the familiar movements of the city. Sooner than he wanted, the glass was empty, but he didn't pour any more.

Instead he paced back down to the workshop and contemplated it for a moment. "Jarvis."

"Yes, sir?"

"Air guitar, would you? Just the strings."

Six horizontal blue lines were projected over the workstation, each thinner than the one below it. Tony wandered over and run his finger through the air, listening to the strum resonate through the workshop speakers. He didn't really want to play anything in particular, just mess around. Strings was all he needed for that.

Well, and maybe - "Mark some frets?"

Small red lines appeared to indicate the division of semitones. Tony poked at them; pretended to pluck, strum; identify chords. It wasn't the best angle for it, really. He played with it for a while, learning to get his fingers in just the right positions, which delicate movements would make the sounds he wanted.

"If you imbued those strings you could probably form the audio equivalent of primitive runes," Loki said from behind him.

Tony dismissed the projection with a sweep of his hand through it and turned around. Loki was dressed up this version; full armor, no helmet but sweeping green cape attached, and holding a really tall spear.

"Nice stick," Tony said with a grin. "Very... manly. Long shaft."

Loki gave a brief roll of his eyes. "This is Gungnir, through which the King of Asgard may channel the magic of the realm."

"And the King of Asgard just handed it over to you," Tony said, letting his tone convey how deeply skeptical he was of that notion.

Loki gave one of his sly shark smiles, all teeth. "Let's just say... I've borrowed it. Now, Tony Stark, little icicle under my skin--" He levelled the spear in a way that was more than a little alarming.

Tony frowned, but Loki had only just got here, there hadn't been *time* for Tony to annoy him enough to try to kill him - probably Loki was just making a show of it to mess with him.

--You have aided the son of Odin Allfather; you have been valiant in battle and shown courage in the face of overwhelming odds. Some of that tedious nonsense about honor and worth," Loki rolled his eyes again, then resumed a serious expression. "In the name of my father and his father before, I, Loki Odinson, bestow unto you the power of All-Speak. Let none revoke this command."

Tony would have made fun of the over-formality, but a bright beam of energy shot from the point of the spear and struck his chest and he couldn't breathe. It felt like walking out of an air-conditioned airport into the soup of 99% humidity, sweltering heat like a physical wall. And *something* - sizzling in his veins, protesting--

Dimly he felt a hand on his chest, heard Loki's low murmur. "It is a gift, little *kläs*. Let it in. 'Tis no threat, I swear it."

Tony blinked up at him, struggling to focus through his body's complete refusal to cooperate. His eyes found Loki's. There was nothing but sincerity and patience in that clear gaze.

Trust... Tony thought hazily. He believed Loki, trusted that this was safe. He felt for the heat suffusing his chest and did his best to 'accept' it, whatever the hell that meant. Let it slide all the way in, mingling with the energy in his veins until they were the same. He breathed in, deeply. Breathed out.

"There," Loki said brightly, holding the spear upright again. "That wasn't so bad, was it?"

Tony shot him a dirty look. He could still feel... whatever that was, settling under his skin.

Loki twisted his hand, and the spear seemed to compact down and disappear kind of... *slantwise* at an angle that went somewhere out of reach. "I will admit, your magic is... unusually resistant to interference. Remnants of that reactor device, I expect."

By now Tony didn't even have a kneejerk objection to the idea of the arc reactor having magical properties; he already knew the element in its core had properties he hadn't fully investigated. There was something else that struck him as odd, though. "You said my body didn't remember the reactor."

"The reactor, no. Whatever energy from it which was absorbed by your magic? That was with you at the start of the day, it will remain with you. It is a part of you." Loki shrugged, like that was the simplest thing in the world. Maybe it was.

"Well, that's inconvenient," Tony muttered.

Loki raised an eyebrow. "An inbuilt defense against manipulation? Hardly the word I would use. Not to mention the added power."

Tony looked at him more closely, and what he saw made him smirk. "Aw, you jealous? I can make you one... if you're not too attached to your ribcage."

For a moment, there was a gleam of temptation in Loki's eyes, then he shook his head and said drily, "I believe I'll leave that option in reserve."

"So what about the All-Speaky All-Heary mojo extravaganza? How do we know if it worked?"

Loki gave a slow, sly smile, and prowled towards him. "Why don't I tell you what I intend to do to you... and you tell me if you can understand."

To be fair, Tony hardly needed a magic alien language to understand *that*.

--

Physics got pushed to the wayside for a while once Tony was able to start learning to recognize and direct energy. While Loki insulted and derided each attempt, there was a strange enjoyment in his tone when he did. Loki, Tony realized, was finally getting to share something he was passionate about with someone he... cared about. In whatever fashion.

It was actually really surprising that Loki still insisted on taking every fifth version off, to continue exploring Earth and trying out things that weren't science or magic.

Tony still struggled to some degree. Trying to 'do' magic took it out of the realm of hypothetical fantasy worlds and back into admitting it was reality. It didn't *fit* with what he knew about the universe and that was frustrating as hell.

"But you're breaking molecules apart, *atoms*. What happens to all the energy released? It can't just disappear, conservation of mass-energy is a fundamental--"

"It's either used to create different atoms, lingers as magical residue, or disperses on another plane. We *discussed* this, it may even be that some aspects of magical residue are detectable as gamma radiation or neutrinos." It said something about how comfortable Loki had become with physics that he didn't put audible quotation marks around those terms anymore.

"Honestly, you sound like Hridflar the Elder with her endless treatise on ever more miniscule acts of magic. You realize if you break everything down into the smallest possible units of information, all you are left with is an infinite number of true-false pin-points. There is no story in that, no artistry. It barely fits the definition of *magic* anymore--"

Tony frowned slightly, cocking his head. "Someone wrote a thesis on magic... if it was broken

down to the smallest possible units of information? Like... magic's version of subatomic particles?"

Loki paused, eyeing him curiously.

"Elementary particles," Tony muttered, raking a hand through his hair. "Quarks, leptons, bosons. *Information states*. Ohhh my god."

"I take it you've either had some bout of inspiration, or had a sudden recollection of the last time my mouth was upon you," Loki said drily.

Tony licked his lips, deciding how to answer. He felt like... he finally felt like he *got* it. He drew his energy up to thrum under his skin and looked at Loki. He could see all the leather Loki was wearing - enchanted admittedly, but still much too heavy an outfit for easy access. And it was made up of molecules and atoms and particles and empty space, and each of the very tiniest particles were simple pieces of information. Mass, charge, spin.

All he had to do was change the information that was encoded there. Persuade the universe that his information, his story, was more correct. Reprogram it.

"You know," Tony said, a smile playing across his lips, "I feel like you're a little overdressed."

And he reached out, and reprogrammed that little portion.

Loki startled, staring down at himself and his new clothes: long-legged jeans and a tee-shirt that said 'Property of Stark Industries', because it seemed like the best opportunity Tony was going to get to stamp his ownership on Loki.

"Did you just...?"

"Oh, I did," Tony confirmed. He suspected his grin was more than a bit wolfish.

Loki looked back up at him, eyes dark and hungry. "Finally, a hint of progress," he said, probably aiming for mocking but it came out rough. Almost before he'd finished speaking, he took three quick strides to Tony and took hold of his waist. "Is there any reason you neglected to give me smallclothes?"

"Well, you know," Tony drawled. "I'm just figuring stuff out, wouldn't want to take any risks around... delicate areas."

"Does it feel particularly delicate?" Loki retorted, tugging Tony against his hips - and no, that was definitely... firm.

Tony reached for the tee-shirt he'd *created*, written into existence - and wasn't that a mind-trip - and gave Loki one of his best sly smiles as he started sliding the hem up. "Scientific method, we'd better test it and find out."

--

Magic, magic, sometimes physics, exploration version. Magic, more magic, ever more magic, exploration version. 'Study break', as Tony sometimes called them. Superhero, supervillain, repeat.

In Hungary, Tony stared at a field of fallen soldiers. He was in the Iron Man armor but he'd taken the helmet off, and the stink of so many dead bodies was making him regret it.

All these dead soldiers... who would wake up fresh and new with no idea they'd even been at war.

Who would die as many times as he wished it, if he wished it, and be surprised every time.

Some shred of dim memory prompted Tony to ask, "Is this what it was like for you?"

He heard a dim clang behind him as Loki tossed something aside. "It?"

"Like none of them are real people."

Footsteps moving up behind him. He could feel Loki behind his shoulder, Loki's breath low and close to his ear. "Yes."

Tony stared at the destruction for a moment and thought about that, what it meant. Loki didn't call him 'mortal' anymore but he knew what Loki thought of humans, Midgardians. Just a mortal, just a toy. He turned, metal-clad arm brushing against Loki's chest-plate, and met Loki's gaze. He wasn't sure why it was suddenly so important but he felt-- weirdly urgent. "I'm real."

Loki looked back at him for a moment, deep and unfathomable, then his expression softened. He brushed a thumb over Tony's cheek. "Yes."

The tight feeling in Tony's body relaxed a little. He leaned into Loki's touch, suddenly more exhausted than he had any right to be. Loki brought his other hand up to cradle Tony's face and kissed him - different from usual, slow and deep.

Oh.

Tony flexed the particular hand muscles that would retract his gauntlets so he could touch back, properly. He liked this. The slow, unfolding warmth of realization in his chest. This might have been happiness.

Okay, except for the smell, but hey. Nothing was perfect.

--

Uncountable versions of the day. A catalogue of mismatched hobbies, archived radio dramas, literature of any and every civilization recorded. Manipulating matter, energy, information states; understanding *astral* and other planes; exploring and creating folds within the universe. Circling around and around, ouroboros, tidal and infinite.

"Your time travel spell, run that by me again," Tony said, fiddling with a stray pen. He wasn't sure he really believed it had ever happened, but even if it was just a false memory of a nonexistent 'before', so were most of Loki's other memories of magic, and they seemed to hold up okay. "You needed to exit the time-stream. That's, what, jumping off the serpent's back?"

"More like cutting my way out from inside it," Loki said, a knife flashing in his hand for only a moment before disappearing again. "The serpent is a metaphor, Tony; don't think overmuch on it."

"Well, thank goodness for that," Tony muttered. "Can you imagine trying to give stitches to time? How would you even call a doctor for that. Would it be a doctor or a vet?"

"I imagine a doctor," Loki said, and grinned. "In a mysterious blue box..."

Tony blinked, confused. "Why in a box? Is that another Jotunheim myth?"

"No, it's..." Loki trailed off, looking weirdly unhappy, and shook his head. "It matters not. There is no bleeding serpent of time."

"For the best." Tony tossed his pen in the air and caught it, tossed it and caught it. "God, imagine the size of that blood clot."

"Your mind is just *fascinating*," Loki said, and made it sound utterly scathing.

"Truer words," Tony said with a grin. He tossed the pen at Loki, aiming for the face.

Loki reached up a hand and caught the pen easily, then paused and looked at it with furrowed eyebrows. "Blood clot."

"No," Tony said slowly, drawing out the vowel. "That's a pen, cupcake. Made for writing."

"I assumed the whole cycle had collapsed. But what if it's still *there*?" Loki raised his eyes to Tony's, looking half-stunned. "What if time has a mechanism to isolate the damage, and *that* is what has trapped us?"

"Wouldn't we just be frozen in time, then?"

Loki shook his head. "A... a clot, to continue the metaphor, is larger than a single pin-point. If this spans roughly the length of a day, and no more, we would simply repeat it as we have been - but that means all we need to do is escape the area which is contained - if we can travel beyond the damage and return to the full cycle of time--"

"Wait just a gosh-darned minute," Tony said, folding his arms. "This is sounding awfully familiar, cowboy."

Loki winced. "I'm aware."

"You're saying that if we skip past the distortion we'll get to regular time."

Loki nodded.

"And *not* that trying to skip into the future will just get us to more of the same. Because it's not just a cycle of one day."

Loki nodded again, looking like he couldn't make up his mind whether to feel sheepish or really irritated.

"So basically," Tony said gleefully, determined to draw this out for as long as he could get away with, "the upshot is that my Bifrost plan, made with science, was *right*. And your magic theory... was wrong."

"You were guessing," Loki snapped, irritation evidently winning out. "You had no way to be sure there would *be* a future to travel to."

"Guessing is a valid part of the scientific method," Tony said smugly. "It comes right before testing. It's what makes the testing part so much fun."

"Magic has its own forms of fun," Loki shot back. "Such as transforming your enemies into *rodents*."

"Not the way I swing, admittedly, but whatever floats your boat."

Loki held onto his irritation for a few moments longer, then a smile stole across his face. "Did you know, mortals are forbidden from setting foot onto Asgard?"

"I thought Foster had been there," Tony said, a little surprised.

"Yes, but Odin would have been furious. I imagine she was very nearly executed." Loki smirked.
"Would you like to see the Realm Eternal, Tony?"

Tony gave an undignified snort in his amusement. "Put like that, how could I refuse?"

--

"Good morning, sir. It's seven a.m., Thursday fourteenth. The weather in New York City is thirty-five degrees and clear, with an expected high of fifty-four."

Hold all calls, cancel all reminders. Shower and brush teeth. Pick out a nice suit, something appropriate for visiting a whole new realm. Tony pocketed a couple of small, basic scanning gadgets, and wandered out to the landing pad of Stark Tower at the scheduled time for pick-up.

The Bifrost was a cascade of light and sound compressed into a few moments. Tony felt like he'd touched a live wire, like the pressure had equalized in his ears except throughout his entire body, like every shred of reactor energy in his body had just come online and was searching for an outlet. The ground slammed up against his feet brutally hard, and he stumbled but managed to stay standing.

A black guy with some serious armor and a massive sword that begged for overcompensation jokes was standing in a dome, staring at Tony with creepy golden eyes. If it weren't for the eyes, Tony might have made the overcompensation jokes... but probably not, considering the guy had his hands clasped around the hilt of a *massive freaking sword*.

"Tony Stark, Iron Man and Protector of Midgard, Shieldbrother to Prince Thor," the guy intoned.
"Welcome to Asgard."

Tony wet his lips. He could smell salt. Ocean. He still felt all charged up; he'd done a lot more work on getting *into* the right mindset for magic than getting out of it. "Uh... thanks," he said.

"The All-Father awaits you."

Tony jerked, feeling something flex and twist under his skin, like wings trying to unfold in a panic.
"Wait, what?"

"Go with the Einherjar," the guy instructed him, then shifted his posture just enough to make it clear he was done acknowledging Tony's presence.

Wow. Apparently the snooty attitude was a general Asgardian trait. Tony looked around, and then he saw that the dome had an exit, with a gleaming translucent bridge towards land, and on the bridge some more guys in armor. And... horses.

Four guys. Five horses.

Terrific.

--

Tony quietly resolved to himself to forget the ride from the dome thing to the palace as quickly as possible. Some people who were presumably servants or stable-hands rushed to lead the horses away, and the armored soldier guys escorted Tony through some hallways to a room with a throne on a raised dais.

The old man on the throne waved a hand and said, "Leave us," in a voice that carried remarkably well for how croaky it was. The armored guys all put their fists over their hearts and then marched out in unison.

"This is awkward," Tony said, and reached up to rub the back of his neck. "Kinda wasn't expecting to meet the parents, I'd have brought a hostess gift."

The old guy, Odin, stood up and walked slowly down the steps of the dais. He had an eyepatch and a fairly impressive beard - could almost have made a good living playing Santa Claus if it weren't for the fact that 'jolly' was pretty much the last word Tony would have used to describe him.

"Given the resources available on Midgard," Odin said cuttingly, "I assure you Asgard will not feel the lack."

"Well, someone's off the birthday card list," Tony muttered, not all that quietly. *Rude.*

The small smirk that played around the corner of Odin's mouth was enough to stir suspicion in Tony's mind. It was easy to see where Loki had got some of his mannerisms from - but he'd expected Odin to be more... straightforwardly hostile? Less with the snide put-downs.

The King gestured and said, "Walk with me," and Tony fell into step.

The palace wasn't in the best condition. There was obvious damage: broken statues, cuts to tapestries, scorch marks on stone. The city had looked pretty rough on the way here, as well.

"Just for, uh, curiosity's sake," Tony said casually, "we're not heading for an execution chamber or anything, are we?"

"Don't be foolish," Odin said, in a tone that was annoyed enough to be reassuring. Then that little smirk showed up again and he added, "Executions are performed in the courtyard, not a chamber indoors. Imagine the mess."

"You are an unbelievable dick," Tony said, slipping into magic-state - it was kind of like slipping on the world's coziest hoodie. Then he reached out with that other sense and poked clumsily at 'Odin', trying to get a feel for what was underneath.

'Odin' snorted. Something soft and gentle folded around Tony's magic, guiding it to what must have been Loki's magical core - a sense of ice and fire and laughter, both cruel and kind.

"You have all the finesse of a herd of rampaging *lodthisch*," Loki told him, the animal name coming with an impression of large and hairy mammals, tusks, thundering feet.

"No, no, don't hold back," Tony said, struggling to keep the laughter out of his voice. "Critique away, I mean it's not like you've had *infinitely* more practice than me."

Loki, still in Odin's guise, gave a slight shrug. "It could be worse. At least it's only *one* herd."

"Do I want to know why you're wearing daddy dearest's face?"

"Poor impulse control," Loki said drily.

Tony grinned, recognizing more than a little of himself in that answer. "Let me guess, it seemed like a good idea at the time?"

"For a certain definition of the word 'good'," Loki agreed, slowing his pace. "It certainly seemed

like it might be interesting. You'll find that in general I'm more interested in discovering results than predicting them."

Tony knew something about that irresistible curiosity, the ever-present question of 'but what happens if...?' He could easily see Loki being the kind of guy who would press a big red button just because it was there.

They came to a halt outside a set of ornate golden doors that seemed to depict some sort of machine involving a large wheel and wires. Loki put a hand on the left door but didn't open it immediately. Instead, he looked down at Tony, his expression a lot harder to read on Odin's face.

"Beyond these doors rests the combined knowledge of most of the Nine Realms. It is very easy to become... distracted. Try to remain within sight of the doors. If you find yourself without landmarks, focus on finding me."

"I've got a pretty good sense of direction," Tony said, dismissing the warning. Libraries were libraries - how big could it be?

"Not this sort, you don't," Loki said, but he pushed open the massive left door and walked inside.

So, it was a pretty sizable room - concert stadium kind of sizable, with a visible staircase that meant more levels above - but the stacks of shelving looked like they were laid out in a pretty standard rectangular fashion. Off to one side were a series of looms and desks where a dozen women were intently studying tapestries and apparently transcribing them.

Loki swept towards the stacks like he owned the place, or like he was wearing the face of the guy who owned the place, which was probably close enough for government purposes. Tony followed, glancing around at the scrolls and books and what could only be described as *tomes*, enormous volumes with battered leather covers.

Loki plucked a surprisingly small book off a shelf, and turned to lead them back. There were shelves where Tony was sure they had walked a moment ago, and he stopped for a moment in surprise before hurrying to catch up with Loki.

"Okay, I got it. Dodgy Goblin King moving maze games," he said out loud.

Yes, he remembered Labyrinth. He'd rewatched it enough to be sure of that.

"Goblins don't live on Asgard," Loki said distractedly, and, "Ah - this way," and then they were in a kind of clearing among the shelves with a large circular table in the middle.

To Tony's great relief, Loki shifted back into his own appearance, albeit wearing a slightly more ornate get-up than usual, with gold tracery over most of the leather.

Loki flipped through the book until he found the section he wanted, then set it down on the table. Tony moved in to get a closer look. It seemed to be magical schematics for the Bifrost control mechanism in at least five dimensions - three space and two astral.

"Your spell," Loki started, then grimaced and corrected himself, "your... method. It involves a Bifrost bridge, or Einstein-Rosen bridge as you call it, and we must accelerate one of the ends beyond the speed of light."

"Ideally," Tony said, "but if we can only get it close to the speed of light, I don't know what's possible--"

Loki cut him off. "The speed isn't the problem. I'm more concerned with holding the bridge open for an extended period of time without destroying anything."

Of *course* there was a problem with the Bifrost. What had Tony expected, that this was going to be easy? Ha. As if. He gave a heavy sigh. "Now you tell me."

"If we open it onto Midgard," Loki reached out and manipulated the schematics projecting from the book, until a little beam shot across the table's surface. "We need to travel from the end that is *not* accelerated, correct?"

"Yeah." Tony leaned in, frowning a little. "At the speed of light it's effectively not aging at all, so if it does that for twelve hours our end will be twelve hours older. But anything that transits - entrance and exit are identical, chronologically. We go in from the older end, we go to the point in time when the other end is the same age - twelve hours in the future. If you can really accelerate it past the speed of light then we've got more time to play with." He grimaced. "So to speak."

"The Bifrost mechanism could endure an open bridge for hours." Loki made an illusion of a planet on the other side of the table, at the end of the beam. "Midgard could not." The illusory planet shattered in an illusory explosion.

"Well, that's a downer." Tony drummed his fingers on the table. "Can we accelerate it fast enough to... age it backwards while only a few seconds passes at the other end? Damn, this sounds like fake science even to me and I *researched* it. I'm putting my faith in you that faster than light acceleration is possible, okay?"

"And I'm deeply honored by your trust," Loki said, with a smile that put the lie to his words. "We'd need-- we were already going to need an external power source, let me think..." He pulled a stick of charcoal from a pocket in space and started jotting magical formulae on the table's surface.

Tony continued looking at the projected schematic, thinking. Could they build something on Earth, some kind of reinforced structure to absorb or redirect the Bifrost's energy? Could the energy be fed directly into accelerating it? Now *that* would be a tidy solution... if they could collect the right materials, process them, and build the structure within a single version. Then still have time to activate the Bifrost and run the acceleration before reset.

Tony had to admit, that might be a *bit* of a tight deadline.

"...but by the time it's tempered..." Loki was muttering, possibly thinking along the same track.

What they really needed was to operate the bridge somewhere harmless in empty space to start with, then when they were ready, switch the end to Earth. Without deactivating it and losing the entire time imbalance they'd created.

Tony took a silent breath as realization struck him. He reached for the mechanism in the book and loosened the bezel around the targeting crystal. "Loki."

"Hm?" Loki glanced up, then did a classic double take, attention caught by the way the miniature Bifrost beam was now sweeping across the table.

"We're going to accelerate it anyway," Tony pointed out. "If it's going *from* somewhere *to* Midgard - Earth - it's not in any single spot long enough to do any damage."

"Simple, yet brilliant," Loki said, and smirked. "We should make that your formal title."

"Probably already a biography subtitle." Tony looked at the projections again and found his

stomach suddenly fluttering. He licked his lips. "Uh. So... this is doable?"

"This... is doable, yes." Loki closed his eyes and exhaled slowly. "We can do this."

Wow. Tony wasn't sure what to say to that. It was hard to really wrap his mind around it. Maybe he'd make up his mind after it really happened... It was kind of hard to believe there'd be any result other than the usual reset and waking up to Jarvis' morning greeting.

After a few moments, Loki opened his eyes again and straightened. "There's one other thing."

"End of the world sex?" Tony guessed.

"Two other things," Loki amended without missing a beat. "No, I want to try strengthening your soul."

Tony raised his eyebrows as high as they would go, which made his forehead feel all kinds of weird but in this situation was definitely called for. "You what now?"

"Your astral form, your consciousness..." Loki hesitated, looking oddly nervous. It didn't suit him. "As you've pointed out, your hippocampus resets each morning. Yet your consciousness seems... not to have any link to that. Possibly it has been overwriting the physical representation, to keep it aligned with what you, your soul, remembers. But... usually, when a mage has been traveling on the astral plane, memories are added, not taken away."

Tony shifted his weight, suddenly wary and not liking that he was only hearing about this now. He hooked a stool out from under the table and sat down on it, watching Loki suspiciously. "Nobody forgets boring stuff when they're flying astral? Come on."

Loki slowly shook his head. "Yes and no - only in as much as memory might slip away from a sleeping body. Yours should be available fresh each morn, at least as they were on the first morning of this clot in time. I... am concerned that your consciousness is not anchored to your body as strongly as it should be."

"And you didn't think I might want to know about this?" Tony demanded, letting his voice rise angrily. "Why the hell didn't you say something earlier, if you can do something about it? So you can feel all superior over the petty little mortal with the fragile Midgardian mind? I thought I was--" his voice roughened; hitched; "I meant--" more than that.

"I didn't want to risk it!" Loki hissed. "Believe it or not, I have begun to learn that I should occasionally consider the consequences of my actions. If it didn't go to plan and left you bound as everyone else, body *and* soul, starting each day anew with no recall of anything I had told you prior--"

"It wasn't your decision! You could have told me about it and then laid out the options, the consequences-- How long have you even known about this? You didn't even like me to start with, you're going to pretend you would have *missed* me?"

"*Tjoklās*," Loki said intensely, and it rang with the sense of *stabbing icicle*, and *intimacy*, and a kind of bone-deep *belonging*. He dropped onto his knees in front of Tony, clasping his hands together on Tony's thighs. "Had I not encountered you I would have lost what remained of my sanity long ago."

"Arguable," Tony muttered, mostly from force of habit. He wasn't even sure what he meant by it. "Anyway... look. You're the one with all the coping skills, remember? And the coming to terms with stuff. I just... have panic attacks and complicated relationships with routine."

"I'm a god of chaos," Loki said with a broken laugh. "And there is none of that without the continuing span of time. Chaos cannot lay down roots and grow when the field is plowed fresh each morning. But *you* - you reacted, you changed; if I insulted you one day you insulted me back the next. I couldn't... daren't risk that."

Tony stared down at him. Loki's eyes were bright, framed by that dark hair falling loose on either side of his face. It was... Tony wasn't even sure if it was a compliment or an insult. Loki needed him around, but then again, only because Loki literally *needed* him around.

Not that Tony really had any moral high ground on that front. He'd gotten more than a little reliant on Loki, psychologically. He knew that. They both knew it.

He sighed and scrubbed a hand through his hair. "Great, so we're both crazy." That didn't help resolve anything. "So, why tell me now? I mean, I get it, you're about to get your chaos back. You kept your mouth shut this long, why not wait until we've done it, just to be sure?"

"Because," Loki said softly, "once we do this, your body will no longer reset, and those memories will be lost to you. I... you are right, it should be your decision."

Tony leaned down to bump his forehead against Loki's, closing his eyes. "Marshmallow," he muttered. "Fine. Explain it to me. What are the downsides?"

"Strengthen the bond too much, you'll lose access to the astral plane, your magic... your memories of these repeating days." Loki's voice was carefully neutral, in a way that was all too telling.

"Strengthen it not enough, then... the effort may fail, you'll continue as you are, with the past long ago and shrouded in your mind's eye."

Tony pulled back a little and opened his eyes. He cocked his head, considering that. "So, a light touch then? If it fails, no harm done?"

"I have been caught unawares so many times," Loki said, looking weary. "Remember that your magic is infused with energy from that reactor. I cannot guarantee that it will respond... predictably."

Of course not. Tony sighed again.

How important were those memories anyway? Did he really care? If this thing was going to work then it might be helpful to remember, uh... his life. People, places, plans... conversations, references... anything that didn't take place on November fourteenth.

If this thing worked, and there was some mysterious future to even worry about. And he'd risk... everything he remembered *now*, basically. Exploring. Magic. Loki.

"I need to think about it," he said tonelessly.

Loki nodded.

"Let's at least work on this in the meantime." Tony nodded his head towards the little image of the Bifrost mechanism. "Magic and math, let's go."

--

On November fourteenth, Tony got up at seven a.m. and spent most of the day building an arc reactor. It wasn't the most elegant reactor ever - speed had been kind of a priority - but it would do the job.

Loki beamed him and the reactor up to Asgard, and they set about hooking the reactor in to the Bifrost. The dude with the giant sword was missing; Loki grimaced when Tony asked about it, and said, "That took nearly as long as it took you to build this device. It would have been much simpler just to kill him, but if this works I would rather not leave Asgard's defenses so weakened."

That wasn't really an answer, but Tony didn't really care.

Finally, it was all hooked up. Tony glanced at his watch (Officine Panerai, simple and elegant). "Just over six hours to reset. We're a little behind schedule, but manageable."

Loki swallowed, then nodded and raised the King's spear. He slammed the butt of the spear against the floor emphatically, and the Bifrost roared to life. The arc reactor started to glow, more and more brightly as its energy fed into the Bifrost mechanism.

"So," Tony said brightly. "We've got some time to kill. Spin the Bottle?"

Loki shot him a puzzled look. "How is spinning a bottle supposed to entertain us?"

Tony smirked a bit. He was still kind of confused about how some of his memories fit together, but having pieces was better than not having them. And he definitely had pieces of memories about Spin the Bottle. "Oh, you have no idea."

The Bifrost continued to run. A few times, small flying craft circled near, but nobody came over the bridge. Tony could only assume Loki had done something to keep people away.

After five and a half hours, when Tony was leaning heavily on Loki and yawning, his alarm beeped. They'd left themselves some leeway, not wanting to get interrupted at the last moment by a reset. Loki straightened at the noise and went to check the targeting.

"Bringing it toward Midgard," he reported, voice tight. "On three, I need you to deactivate the arc reactor. One... two... three."

The reactor powered down with a bit of a mosquito-like whine that suggested it wouldn't have been a good idea to keep it running much longer anyway. Loki stepped away from the Bifrost mechanism to Tony's side and wrapped an arm around his waist. "Ready?"

"I don't know," Tony blurted. He hadn't meant to say it out loud.

"Neither do I," Loki admitted, and the last thing Tony saw before they were flung through the Einstein-Rosen bridge was Loki turning the spear on the arc reactor, blasting it apart.

Then they were on the landing pad at Stark Tower, runes scorched heavily into what had once been a flat surface. Tony stumbled briefly on the uneven footing. It was windy and cold so he headed for the door into the penthouse, Loki close behind.

It wasn't four in the morning, he realized. Or, it was - according to his watch - but there was daylight under a dull, overcast sky. He barely registered Loki speaking, too busy frowning out the window. Unease stirred in his chest. "I don't think it worked."

Loki moved closer, tone sharp and concerned. "What makes you say that?"

Tony gestured outside. "The sky... it looks fake. That's not Manhattan sky."

Loki gave a worried frown and raised a hand, prodding the realm's aura. "This feels like Midgard. It certainly looks like your tower."

"I know what the sky looks like, Loki," Tony insisted. "Maybe not so well for other parts of the planet but Manhattan is blue right across the window," he held his hand out and dragged it across the air to demonstrate, "all through the day. That is *not* Manhattan's sky."

"Oh," Loki said, and smiled. "Tony... what day is it?"

"What?" Tony said, staring at him in confusion. (Thursday fourteenth, the weather was thirty-five degrees and clear--)

"It is Friday, November twenty-ninth, sir," Jarvis chimed in. "You have been missing for approximately fourteen days, thirteen hours, thirty-seven minutes. You have five hundred sixty-eight new voice messages. How shall I categorize for you?"

Fri...what? That wasn't even a thing, that was like 'tomorrow' and the other imaginary words. There was Thursday, and, and, sure they were *trying* to fix-- but it wasn't *real*, it wasn't like there was a whole giant simulation outside the subroutine, they were--

It was Thursday, it was always Thursday. Electrons were negatively charged, entropy always increased, it was Thursday. Basic principles of the physical world.

Tony shook his head, uncomprehending. He must have... maybe they'd misheard Jarvis. Or this was... but it was Thursday and the sky looked wrong and-- what if somewhere in the world there was a duplicate of Stark Tower, some weird scheme that was eternally half in-progress, that would explain the sky and still being on Midgard and then, of course, it wasn't Jarvis it was whatever imposter or counterfeit system the bad guys had designed and. And. He didn't know what it was for but that was, that had to be the answer, this wasn't Manhattan so it must be fake Stark Tower, some pirated knock-off that--

Loki was tugging him close, one hand at his waist and the other curled snug and gentle on the side of his neck. "*Breathe*," Loki murmured. "Find your rhythm, *tjokläs*. That's right. Steady."

Tony closed his eyes so he didn't have to look at everything that was wrong about the fake Tower. He made a small noise of complaint and shifted forwards, pressing his forehead against the top of Loki's chest. Breathing in rhythm. The flow of energy in his veins.

#

Tony Stark Is Alive and Well and Going Viral

Chapter Summary

When you're trapped in a time-loop, putting things off really *does* make them go away.

Unfortunately, that's no longer the case.

Chapter Notes

Uh, so remember how there was 'one chapter to go'?

I was just filling in some tiny bits... and it sort of exploded on me. Sorry about that...

They wound up on the couch, Tony curled into Loki's side with Loki's arm holding him close. Tony had never been more grateful for Loki's attitude of sober acceptance to freak-outs. There were a lot of things Loki made fun of, but whenever Tony was genuinely terrified, Loki turned serious and calm and steadying.

"...and so we slew the bandits with little trouble," Loki was saying, his thumb rubbing back and forth on Tony's ribs where his hand rested, "but among their possessions was a shoulder-cape that Fandral took a particular liking to, not recognizing the style as Predínesse..."

In some ways, Tony was a little envious of Loki's memory. Whether it was to do with being a long-lived species, or Tony not being properly... *integrated* with his body - the reasons didn't really matter. They'd tried, Loki had tried, to strengthen whatever needed strengthening. There were maybe a few more patchy memories than there had been, jostled by sights and smells. Not what there should be, though.

They could have tried again. When it came down to it, Tony had made the choice. He didn't want Loki to push too hard. He didn't want to lose what he had *now*.

"Sir," Jarvis announced, "Miss Potts is in the elevator. She is accompanied by Mistery Blake and Shen, from Security."

Tony jolted with a mixture of confusion and interest. That-- didn't happen, Pepper was working all day and then she had a dinner meeting. He felt Loki's hand tighten slightly on his side. "I don't-why?"

Jarvis generated a slight pause before responding. "She asked to be notified if there was any sign of you, sir. Should I not have?"

"No, that's... that's fine." Tony reached down to put his own hand over Loki's, holding it there. He wriggled around just enough to be able to glance up and see Loki's face.

"Are you ready for this?" Loki asked quietly.

"Guess we'll find out," Tony said with forced cheerfulness. He made no move to get up from the couch, this was his penthouse, he didn't have to get up if he didn't want to. Besides, he'd been up and running since seven a.m. and it was... Friday, apparently. Two weeks later because the arc reactor-powered Bifrost could accelerate to physically ridiculous speeds. Loki hadn't been kidding about speed not being a problem.

The elevator opened; Loki's outfit shifted from enchanted leather to high thread-count wool. "Tony?" Pepper's voice called. "Are you...?"

"Fireplace," Tony called back, and the sound of Pepper's voice made him think about coffee, damn, that was a great idea.

Pepper rounded the end of the couch, flanked by two guys in suits who both had their hands loitering suspiciously near hidden holsters. Tony looked up hopefully. "Do you have coffee? -- Wow, you look terrible."

Pepper gaped at him a moment, pale - freckles blotted out by make-up, the under-eye concealer was basically *caked* on, like a horrifying plaster mask - and her eyes were bloodshot. "My best friend just went missing, *again* - are you all right? Oh my god, I've been worried sick. Was it--?" She shifted slightly towards Loki, pasting on a formal expression. "I'm sorry, I don't believe we've been introduced, Mister...?"

Tony opened his mouth to explain, but Loki interrupted smoothly, "Agent Walker. Forgive me for not standing, Mister Stark is still... recovering."

Pepper's gaze flickered to where Loki's arm was wrapped around Tony, then back up to their faces. "Tony," she said, more softly, "do you need anything?"

"Coffee," Tony repeated patiently. Okay, he knew there were machines on the bench, there were beans in the middle one. He could probably just... tug on the warmth of magic, like that, and reach out to put a cup in place.

(He didn't really 'move' the cup, technically. He looked at it and looked at the air under the coffee machine and just over-wrote each of them with the information that had been in the other place. Technically, he was destroying the cup and creating it anew. He hadn't had the guts to try this out on anything living, yet. Loki could deal with the actual teleportation, if they needed it.)

He turned the coffeemaker on and the sound made Pepper jump. She darted a suspicious look at the machines on the bench. Loki snickered a little and ducked his head to mutter in Tony's ear, "Forty-five seconds."

Tony huffed and refused to acknowledge the comment.

"All right," Pepper said, looking worried. "You're here now, and safe-- you are safe, aren't you? We'll release a brief statement - how much can we say?" The last part was directed at Loki.

Tony made a face. "Can we just... leave it? 'Til tomorrow? Give me some time to find my feet."

"Of course," Pepper was agreeing, quick and easy, but Loki cleared his throat.

"Bear in mind," Loki told him, "that it will be a delay, nothing more."

Oh. Tony blinked, realizing what Loki meant. It wouldn't reset, in theory. 'Tomorrow' would be... essentially, the next version, but with everyone remembering this one. Instead of an imaginary dumping ground, an easy diversion tactic.

There must have been an unhappy expression on his face, because Pepper said firmly, "A delay is fine, Tony. Take a day, okay? Do you mind if Agent Walker tells me what happened?"

"Sure," Tony said, as an impish thought struck him. He kept his face innocent and his eyes wide as he tipped his head to look at Loki. "Why don't you brief everybody, Agent Walker?"

"Well, it's mostly classified, as I'm sure you can understand," Loki said blandly. Pepper and the security guys were nodding. "But a breakthrough enabled us to make contact with Mister Stark and... work together to facilitate his escape. He's somewhat shaken, but physically unharmed."

"So it didn't have anything to do with-- the other thing?" Pepper asked. Other thing?

Loki hesitated. "Ah..."

Something in Pepper's stance changed, becoming carefully professional and washed out of any emotion. She gave a polite, artificial smile. "I'm sorry, what agency did you say you were with, again?"

"The... Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division," Loki said, slight tension in his voice that probably only Tony could recognize, and where the hell did he come up with that name anyway?

Belatedly Tony realized that it was the full name of SHIELD, which might be the only agency Loki even *knew*, but also how the hell did he *remember* that name, anyway?

"Of course," Pepper said, still smiling that artificial smile. "Well, I'm sure Tony would like to rest. We won't trouble you any longer." She gave Tony a long, meaningful look, then nodded at the security guys. "Gentlemen."

Tony craned his head to watch the three return to the elevator, then cocked his head curiously as the doors closed. "I wonder what *that* was about."

"She's going to try to rescue you from me," Loki pointed out, something gleeful in his voice. "That's adorable."

Tony snorted with some amusement. "I blame you. 'Oh, look at me, I'm Agent Walker. I'm completely above board and there is nothing to be suspicious about at all.'"

"It's not like *you* were any help," Loki retorted. "Not even a minute before throwing your magic around."

Tony shrugged, grinning unrepentantly. "Sofa's comfortable."

Loki snorted softly, and summoned the coffee over to pass it to Tony. Tony hummed in gratitude and inhaled deeply. Caffeine good. Did traveling through time count as jetlag? It should do, it was hard to change time-zones more emphatically than fourteen and a half days into the future.

"I'm surprised Thor didn't notice the Bifrost," Loki mused.

Tony sipped at his coffee, lounging comfortably against Loki's side. It seemed slightly more bitter than it usually did from that machine. It was probably his imagination. "Eh. I guess we should figure out something to tell him."

"Mm. And I suppose I should put..." Loki trailed off, then sat up straighter, dislodging Tony slightly. "Oh. I think I know what that 'other thing' your friend mentioned might be."

Tony sighed and sat up properly, dabbing at a splash of spilled coffee on his jacket. "What?"

Loki gave a sheepish sort of smirk. "The same day you went missing, I guarantee the King of Asgard also disappeared. Thor was probably summoned home. It may have occurred to somebody to wonder if I had survived the Dark Elves and sought some kind of twisted revenge."

Tony blinked for a moment, then took a long swig of coffee. He swiped the back of his hand across his mouth. "So when you were posing as Odin, you were... *literally* posing as Odin. That's how you were starting off the day?" There's something hilarious in that, Loki waking up in every version of the morning disguised as a grumpy old man. "So - *we* went missing, because we went through the Bifrost..."

"And it would have seemed to Asgard as though Odin Allfather disappeared, yes," Loki admitted, looking a touch too pleased with himself to be really rueful. "As I was saying, I suppose I should put him back."

Tony started to laugh. "I'm almost afraid to ask. No, I'm not, who am I kidding? Where did you even, where is he?"

"Not far from here, actually." Loki glanced towards the window, with its unnatural-looking clouded sky. "In one of those homes where Midgardians care for your elders."

Tony laughed harder and had to put his cup of coffee down on the floor. "You put the King of Asgard in a *nursing home*. I'll say one thing, Marshmallow, you really know how to show you care."

"Yes, well," Loki started, then seemed to realize he didn't really have a good answer and shrugged instead. "Given that I imagine these chambers will be attacked at any moment to free you from my vile clutches, do you want to come restore Odin's mind with me?"

Tony picked up his cup and drained the last of the coffee, then stood up and offered a hand to Loki. "Sounds like a blast."

--

They left the building out the private entrance this time, instead of the main lobby. Tony had thought to grab a winter coat and he pulled it snug around himself as Loki hailed a cab. The driver, unfortunately, recognized Tony and spent the whole drive chatting about how glad he was that Iron Man was back and how much his sister had missed knowing that Iron Man was out there protecting the city. Tony just nodded along patiently.

When they got to the nursing home - Shady Acres - Loki gave the driver a hundred dollar note and told him to keep the change. Tony raised an eyebrow but waited for the cab to drive off before commenting, "Did you create that out of thin air? Are there two notes with the same serial number now? It's not nice to set people up for counterfeiting, Agent Walker."

"I summoned it from your wallet," Loki said with a straight face, and started towards the door.

Tony slipped his hands in his pockets and followed. "Well, at least one of us knows where my wallet is."

Shady Acres was kind of a misnomer. The place wasn't exactly *expansive*. The decorating was nice, sure - but Tony was willing to bet the total section wasn't even one acre, let alone several. Maybe it had been once, bits and pieces of land sold off over the years. It couldn't be much longer until even this last parcel was gone. Tony had a fair idea how much a developer would pay for land

in this part of town.

Odin's room, apartment, whatever it was, was a tiny fraction of the size of the throne room alone. Tony felt a little sorry for him, weirdly enough. Odin himself even seemed less impressive than when Loki had been play-acting as him.

"I'm... I'm... I know you," Odin said slowly, brows furrowed as he looked at Loki.

"Not really," Loki said with a sigh. "Not for a long time."

Tony cast him a sideways look, then decided to just say it out loud. "Seems kind of unfair to be cryptic to a senile guy."

Loki nodded slightly, conceding the point, then pulled Odin's spear out of whatever space fold it had been tucked in. "This belongs to you," he said firmly, holding it forward.

Odin seemed to recognize it, then looked, if anything, even more confused. But he reached out a hand and wrapped it around the shaft of the spear.

There was a blaze of released energy that even Tony felt as the spell on Odin shattered. The figure who drew himself up, armored and angry, was every bit an ancient king.

"What is the meaning of this!"

"I'm returning your throne," Loki said mildly. "...The seat was dreadfully uncomfortable."

Tony didn't bother to stifle his snort.

"Loki!" Odin snarled. "As if your crimes weren't bad enough, you have compounded them with fresh treason! Frigga's kindness will no longer stay my hand--"

"And I grieve with you," Loki interrupted, turning serious. "I know we share at least our love for her. I seek no quarrel with you, Father. I came to return to you what is yours, and trouble you no longer."

Odin's visible eye was suspiciously shiny, but his voice was filled with hardened fury. "If you think you will so easily escape justice--"

"No one truly escapes justice," Loki said, and smiled pleasantly. "They merely cover up their sins with fresh plaster and pictures of false tales. Revisionist history, the Midgardians call it."

Tony looked from one to the other, suspicious that he was missing something. It sounded like some semi-profound bullshit metaphor but apparently it meant something to Odin because he'd gone silent, watching Loki intently with that piercing blue eye.

"As I said, I seek no quarrel with you." Loki inclined his head in a partial bow. "I would prefer this story have... a peaceful ending. And if, after some time has passed, you were to find within yourself a desire to speak with me, well..." He shrugged elegantly. "You may discover we have much to talk about."

Odin closed his eye for several seconds. When he opened it again, it was watering even more, but he turned aside and used the spear to blast a hole in the wall.

"What the fuck," Tony said, as Odin strode outside.

"Let him go," Loki said, reaching out to put a hand on Tony's shoulder. "Last he recalls, I was..."

somewhat more hostile towards him. This went surprisingly well, all things considered."

Odin was bellowing, "Heimdall!" up at the sky.

"Yeah, don't think I didn't notice the sweet smell of blackmail in the air." Tony watched the Bifrost appear, one end of a targeted Einstein-Rosen bridge, and swallow Odin up. "Do I want to know what that was about?"

"Asgard's sordid history. If you ever have a temper tantrum in the throne room and destroy large portions of the ceiling, you'll discover an entirely different fresco beneath." Loki sighed, turning away from the wrecked wall. "It seems our family was dysfunctional long before Odin adopted me."

"Well, that's a shocker," Tony said sarcastically.

Loki was feeling himself enough to smirk, so it couldn't have been too terrible. Tony decided to believe the line about the conversation going surprisingly well. Odin hadn't tried to run the spear through either of them, after all.

"Is everything all right, Mister Walker?" a woman's voice came from the doorway. "I heard-- oh, my god!"

"Ah," Loki said, "yes, the wall. I apologize for my father. He won't be needing the room anymore, by the way."

Tony turned his head to regard Loki with respect for a line *supremely* well-delivered. Deadpan, he said, "You've got a real way with words, you know that?"

Loki flashed him a sly, quicksilver grin and said, "It's been mentioned."

--

Tony didn't want to go back to the Tower and deal with the situation there right away, although Loki made a point of reminding him - again - that a delay was only a delay and wouldn't make the problem go away. Tony pointed out that there was still a superstitious chance for everything to go wrong and reset again, then regretted it at Loki's expression.

"Let's just walk," he said, desperately searching for a distraction to take that cracked, trapped look out of Loki's eyes. "We'll take the slow way back, come on."

Loki followed along easily enough, but he was too quiet. Guiltily Tony chattered to fill up the silence, pointing out things that were weird - the Playstation Four was on sale, how was that not a hoax, it had been 'coming soon' for basically Tony's entire memory.

They passed a music shop playing an unfamiliar tune and Tony stopped short because it was an *unfamiliar tune*. "Do you hear that?" he blurted in astonishment.

"The music?" Loki raised a questioning eyebrow. "What about it?"

"This is-- I've never heard this. I've literally never heard this, what--" The song ended; cross-faded into that Royal one about the kid pretending to be rich and famous, and Tony shook his head, pushing into the store. "Hey. Hey, you, behind the counter, what's your name?"

"Matt--"

"Matt, great to meet you, hi. That song that was playing just now--"

'Matt' stared at him, looking a bit overwhelmed, which was a look Tony was pretty used to getting. "The Pharrell Williams track?"

"If that's the one that was just playing, yeah. I need that on again. Can you put that on for me?" Tony gave his best winning smile.

"Uh, that's just the radio, but I can... we've got a sound system, just-- just let me finish-- sorry, sir," Matt added to the customer whose transaction he was in the middle of putting through. People were whispering to each other in other parts of the store; Tony saw a teenage girl pointing at him.

"No worries," the customer said, sounded Australian; tourist maybe. But he looked at Tony like he recognized him and said, "Weren't you just on the news?"

"Probably," Tony said truthfully. He waited for the guy to finish up and leave, trying not to look too impatient while he did. Loki just looked slightly confused, loitering near the door.

"Okay, hang on one moment..." Matt the store clerk dropped under the counter for a moment, switching around some cables. The music cut out, overhead. Matt came back up, tabbed through some windows on the computer, clicked a few buttons. Then the new song started playing, a bass and cymbals and a cheerful vocal to go with the beat.

Tony cocked his head, listening intently. This... was new. He'd listened to everything he could get his hands on, maybe all of recorded music history, who even knew? And then there was this, with its up-beat tempo and vocal harmonies and a man singing about happiness... it was perfect. Tony laughed low in delight.

"Yeah, it's a pretty good track," the store clerk said awkwardly.

Tony nodded, attention mostly still focused on the music coming from the speaker. The chorus was pretty easy to pick up. He smirked at Loki, beckoning. "Come on, Marshmallow... clap along."

"You're ridiculous," Loki told him, but cracked a smile at least, so that was something.

Tony let his smirk widen as he heard the next chorus approach; he clicked his fingers in time with the beat, playing it up. He strutted towards Loki, tiny increments, crooning along. "Clap along... if you feel like a room without a roof. Clap along... if you feel like happiness is the truth."

"You *must* be joking," Loki deadpanned, but the smile reached his eyes now.

"No, no," a voice cut in - the teenager who'd been pointing Tony out to her friend earlier. "It's more like this, you gotta..." She shimmied her shoulders from side to side, demonstrating while her friend looked completely mortified.

Well, hell, Tony was always up for helping someone put that look on a friend's face. He smiled brightly at the kid, imitating her movement. "Like this?"

The girl's face lit up. "Right!" she chirped enthusiastically. "Then the hands--" Clicking high up by her shoulders, wrists flexing and fluid as she moved.

"Oh my *god*," the friend hissed, covering her face with her hands.

Tony laughed and kept dancing, putting a little more of his body into it. He could see a couple of the other customers gently grooving from side to side as they browsed. All too soon the song ended

and he looked accusingly at the store clerk. "Matt! I thought you had my back, man."

"I can't just put it on repeat," Matt protested.

"A hundred bucks says you can," Tony retorted.

Loki gave a small snort and said, "I'm the one who knows where your wallet is, remember?" But he walked over to the counter and flashed an actual hundred dollar bill, and Matt looked slightly panicked - but he took the money and put the song back on.

Tony grinned and gave both of them a double thumbs up. He looked back at the teenager who'd been dancing a moment ago and flicked his eyebrows up in question. She grinned right back and flung her arms in the air, throwing herself into the rhythm.

"Well, all right, then," Tony declared, ready to rise to the challenge. He saw a young guy with a leather jacket and a messy bun sneaking glances at them, and he jerked his head to the guy in invitation. "Come on, spontaneous dance party, let's get some action up in here!"

Loki started to laugh. Manbun turned his back, but a couple of other shoppers joined in. Tony stripped his coat off and tossed it to Loki, at which a woman hooted then slapped a hand over her own mouth, blushing furiously. Tony grinned at her and put a little extra swivel in his hips just for that.

They made it to a second replay. Tony sang along more and more as he picked up the words; there was plenty of repetition, nice and easy. The dancing girl started whispering her friend's name - assuming the friend was called Laetitia - with increasing urgency. Someone in the country section looked like they were filming on their cellphone.

Finally Laetitia hissed, "I hate you!" then opened her mouth and started to *sing*. "Because I'm happy...yyyy...yyyy..."

Tony's jaw might have dropped at the amount of power in her voice. He recovered quickly enough to whoop at her and then pick up the rhythm with only a couple of dropped beats.

...clap along if you know what happiness is to you...

Dancing girl reached out for Laetitia's arm and pirouetted herself underneath it. Matt had started dancing behind his counter, little bit of footwork, clapping over his head.

...clap along if you feel like that's what you wanna do...

A couple of people stuck their heads in from outside, then seemed to decide they really *had* seen what they thought they'd seen, and came on in to join the party. Tony raised his voice to encourage the others who were singing. He caught Loki's eye, grinned, and beckoned again.

Loki shook his head, looking deeply amused. Tony pouted. Loki just smirked, staying where he was. Tony rolled his eyes, then he rolled his hips, clapping along. He threw in a little bit of a moonwalk, to some laughter and a smattering of applause.

It finished all too quickly. Tony lowered his arms and blew kisses at the people nearby, even though the song was starting over. "Thank you, thank you, you're all beautiful people. Support your local music store!"

"We're not exactly indie," Matt said, looking more relaxed in the face of Tony Stark after seeing him dance like a dork for ten minutes.

"Rubbish," Tony said blithely, "won't hear a word against you. Coat?" He reached out and Loki passed it to him. He headed for the exit, pausing there to pull the coat back on and wave farewell to his impromptu partiers.

"Well, that was enjoyable," Loki said as they headed back out onto the street.

Tony shot him a look. It was hard to tell from Loki's expression if he was being sincere, making fun of Tony, or a mixture of both. Probably a mixture, come to think of it.

"Just wait," Tony said, letting his arm brush against Loki's as they walked. "I'll get you to dance."

"I don't dance," Loki said.

Tony snorted. "I've seen you fight. It's pretty close."

Loki smiled wryly. "I don't dance without other people bleeding."

"You say that and it's probably inappropriate that I find that sexy."

"Maybe here." The smile lingered on Loki's lips. "On Asgard it wouldn't raise an eyebrow. A warrior's prowess, and so on."

"Kinky, and yet completely unsurprising." Tony cast a sidelong look in Loki's direction. "That wallet I have... somewhere."

Loki raised his eyebrows slightly. "Mm?"

"Think you could snag a credit card out of it?"

"I *could*," Loki enunciated carefully. "What is it worth to me?"

"Well, I'm betting we'll get more time uninterrupted in a hotel bed than we will in mine." Tony quirked a grin sideways, a little shrug, like it was just information he was offering. "Food for thought."

Loki chuckled. "You have the most delightful stalling tactics."

Okay, so Tony didn't want to deal with that mess yet, so sue him. "Is it working?"

In answer, Loki plucked a credit card out of the air and spun it between his fingers.

--

Tony jolted awake in the dark with people shouting and pointing weapons and Loki tugging armor from a space fold and none of it was possible because *this did not happen*. This wasn't his bedroom and he didn't know where all the people had come from and Jarvis wasn't saying anything.

"Stark," said a man's voice he vaguely recognized, "oh, Jesus, he's-- *Stark*."

"It's seven a.m.," Tony croaked out, ice in his veins. His body felt *weird*, he had sore spots on his neck and shoulder, *aches*. "It's seven a.m., Thursday fourteenth. The weather in New York City is thirty-five degrees and clear--"

"Now look what you've done," Loki snarled, sounding absolutely *pissed*.

"--with an expected high of fifty-four."

Someone was telling Loki not to move and someone was telling him to surrender and someone else was saying urgently "Mister Stark, can you hear me?" but none of them were Jarvis and Jarvis wasn't saying anything.

"Good morning sir it's seven a.m. Thursday fourteenth," Tony muttered to himself, because that was *how the day started*, that was how it had to start, why wasn't Jarvis saying his *line*? "The weather in New York City--"

"I had a *plan*, you incompetent *swine*," Loki spat, kicking rifles out of people's hands, spinning one guy around to use as a human shield while forcing his weapon off-target so the bullet went into the wall. Loki wasn't even here, Loki couldn't be here until 10:03.

(--*is thirty-five degrees and clear--*)

"I was going to ease him into it--" Loki tossed the guy he was holding into another guy; punched a third in the gut and then elbowed one behind him in the throat. "But you *had* to come barging in, too impatient to just stop and *find out--* every realm is the same, I swear--"

(--*with an expected high of fifty-four--*)

Something large and metallic glinted in the darkness, moving fast. Loki caught it and for a moment Tony saw it clearly: a round shield, white star on blue, red circles.

(--*good morning sir it's seven a.m., Thursday fourteenth--*)

"Somehow, I don't think your plan is going to work out any better than the last one," a man said confidently, another voice that Tony was sure he recognized. Captain America's shield, Captain America the *person*, Steve Rogers. "Let him go, Loki."

"The weather in New York City is thirty-five degrees," Tony whispered. His fingers were clenched in the bedsheets. "And clear... with an expected high of fifty-four."

Loki smacked the shield against a light switch and Tony squinted against the sudden brightness, cursing. Loki had grabbed another body in the meantime, wrenching this one's gun away and pressing the muzzle to the side of the agent's helmet. (Barrel was shorter than a rifle's, Tony recognized distractedly; a carbine, looked like a Colt M4.) The other people in the room, the ones who were still standing, stopped moving.

"Excuse me for just one moment," Loki gritted out, all false politeness and a hostage to enforce it. Without taking his eyes off Steve, he called over to Tony. "My *kläs*, how is this meant to begin?"

"Good morning, sir," Tony told him, a breath of relief that Loki *got it*, but of course Loki did; Loki *knew* him, by now. "It's seven a.m., Thursday fourteenth..."

"Son of a bitch," Steve said nonsensically, glaring even harder at Loki for no apparent reason. Steve shouldn't be here either, Steve should be out for a morning run, none of this was *possible*.

"Good morning, sir," Loki repeated pleasantly. His eyes were on Steve but his face was turned slightly in Tony's direction. "It's seven a.m., Thursday fourteenth. The weather in New York City is thirty-five degrees and clear, with an expected high of fifty-four."

Tony's breath escaped him in a rush, and some of the tension drained out of his muscles. That made more sense. Not Jarvis, but still. Closer. It was better. "Hold all calls, cancel all reminders," he murmured, more for completeness than out of necessity.

"Better?" Loki asked.

"Yeah," Tony exhaled gratefully, bracing a hand on the mattress to sit up. He closed his eyes for a moment, just long enough for another breath in and out. He didn't like this, there was still a hollow pit in his stomach, but he could think a little, at least. "Thanks."

"You're quite welcome." Loki tossed the carbine he was holding at Tony (definitely an M4, well, an M4A1, with a forward grip), and shoved the hostage away. "Now," and he was clearly addressing Steve again, "are we ready to have a calm, reasonable discussion, or do you want to stomp about and threaten some more?"

"Threatening works for me," muttered one of the helmeted figures, a woman. One of the guys on the floor started to lift his weapon. Tony didn't bother to point it out. He wouldn't have had time for a warning anyway, because almost immediately Loki spun around and kicked the gun aside.

Loki was playing nice. Tony probably would have kicked the guy in the head. Actually, Loki would usually have just snapped all their necks.

"Fine," Steve said tightly. "We'll play this your way... for now."

Tony ran his free hand through his hair, trying to think. His clothes were in his walk-in closet but his closet... wasn't here. More magic practice, then. Being careful with the gun, he swung his legs over the edge of the bed (why did he *ache*, why wasn't he fresh and new) and concentrated for a moment. He wanted... underwear, shirt, pants and jacket. Socks and shoes. Make that a button cuff shirt, no cufflinks, keep it relatively simple. So... hijack some astral energy for the extra mass - rewrite the air closest to his body - there. Clothes.

There were a few stifled gasps from the peanut gallery. Loki said, with a trace of smugness, "You just can't help yourself, can you?"

"Yeah, I'm sure you've got no ulterior motive to prefer me undressed," Tony retorted, hooking the carbine's sling over his shoulder. Where had he last handled a carbine? Flash of memory - standing on the shore of the Black Sea at twilight, showing Loki the parts of the weapon. Loki backlit by the lights of Samsun, gesticulating and complaining about the concept of a military draft that didn't kick in until adulthood, past the best training years.

"You're a real lousy heel, aren't you," Steve said, sounding disgusted, as Tony stood up.

Oh... he was still talking to Loki. Tony felt weirdly annoyed and protective, but also kind of touched. "You don't need to defend my virtue, Steve," he said with a wry smirk. "I appreciate it, I do, but--" What had he just stepped on? That looked like *his* shirt on the floor, but... that had been the previous version, Loki tossing it out of the way... it couldn't be there... it wasn't how...

"Tony," Loki said, low voice gentle. "Remember to breathe."

Tony jerked his head up and met Loki's steady gaze. Right. "I'm breathing," he said, putting action to words. "This is me breathing."

One of the guys in tactical gear was demanding Loki tell them what he'd done to him. Tony eyed the tactical assault team assembled in the hotel room and his hands tightened on the carbine's grips for a moment. This wasn't how the day started. This wasn't how it *worked*. He hated feeling so off-balance.

Out loud, he just said thoughtfully, "We're going to need more chairs."

"Allow me," Loki said, with a casual wave of his hand that did nothing to disguise the surge of power that came next. The room extended an extra five or six yards, fancy accordion folds and twists in the fabric of space that defied Tony's examination. A heavy wooden table came next, surrounded by cushioned office chairs and one ostentatious wingback.

Tony snorted a little at the unnecessary display. "Competitive much?"

"I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about," Loki said breezily, strolling to the wingback. "Gentlemen, Agent Romanoff - if you'd care to join?"

Tony walked over and took a seat next to Loki. Steve clenched his jaw but came to sit down too, halfway down one side of the table. The assault team spaced themselves out behind him, staying on their feet. The ones who still had guns had their hands on their weapons. One guy was slumped against a wall, and another had his hand wrapped around his right forearm, looking pale.

"Thank you," the female squad member said blandly. Belatedly, Tony realized he knew her, that that was Romanoff. "We prefer to stand."

Loki shrugged. "Suit yourself."

"All right, Loki," Steve said fiercely, eyes hard under his goofy blue hood. "What's your game here? Revenge? You've got to know we're not going to let you just waltz on outta here."

"So dramatic," Tony said approvingly. "Relax, Steve. He's on my side."

"I'll bet," one of the agents muttered, and right - they all thought Loki was... *doing* something to him.

"My intentions are entirely--" Loki paused, and looked like he was trying to find a word that gave him more leeway than 'benign'. "--Peaceful. As I told the Allfather--"

"Was that before he went missing two weeks ago?" Steve said, with an air like he'd caught Loki out in something.

"After, actually," Loki said.

But they'd slept since then, they'd-- There'd been 'it's seven a.m. and thirty-five degrees' and that meant none of it had happened. Tony shook his head slowly, trying to get his mind around the fact that to everyone else the previous version--

No, not a version of The Day. Just... a day.

"Odin's back on Asgard," he said, partly to back Loki up and partly to convince himself, to taste the words and try to feel like they were real. "Check with Thor if you like."

Steve didn't answer immediately, and Loki murmured, "Thor might still be there."

Hm. Okay, well, no biggie. "The nursing home then. Odin blew a big hole in their wall."

Loki looked like he was trying not to laugh. "I feel like that might not help our cause."

"Ugh." Tony leaned back in his chair to see how far it would flex, shooting a mild glare at the ceiling. The gun hanging on his shoulder slipped and he readjusted the sling. "All right, we could probably have planned this out better."

"Don't be concerned for my sake," Loki said, a satisfied curl in his voice. "I'm greatly looking

forward to seeing how this plays out."

A smile tugged at the corner of Tony's mouth. "Chaos monger," he said fondly, sitting back upright in the chair. His neck twinged, low where it curved into the top of his shoulder. He poked at it curiously, finding a spot that flared with heat and mild pain. Wait - was that where Loki had bit him? Why was that even still there? It *was*, these were sex aches, wow. That... right.

Time. Doing the not resetting thing.

Steve looked-- well, constipated, kind of, and also full of a kind of helpless rage. It was Romanoff who stepped forward, pulling her helmet off to reveal a controlled, unreadable expression.

"You win, Loki," she said calmly. "You've displayed your power, proved your point. Stark is under your thumb. You've got the advantage. Now what?"

"My, my," Loki said, leaning forward with over-acted curiosity in his voice. "Agent Romanoff, such *anger*, such *hate*. I had no idea you cared so strongly for Tony Stark."

Tony looked from Loki to Romanoff then back again, skeptically. "How can you even tell?" It was more rhetorical than anything but the expression on Steve's face said he might be thinking the same thing.

Romanoff just shifted slightly, adjusting her weight, and lifted her chin. "Now what?" she repeated. Maybe it sounded a little more steely than usual, maybe not.

Loki tilted his head, looking contemplative, then looked at Tony and raised his eyebrows, leaving the next move to him.

"I mostly want to go back to bed," Tony said honestly. "What time is it, anyway? Doesn't matter. Jetlag. Any chance you're all just going to take our word that everything's under control here?"

"No," Steve answered.

Yeah, that was pretty much what Tony had figured. Hm... Loki wanted chaos? He could do chaos.

Tony leaned forward, elbows on the table, lacing his fingers together. The carbine knocked against the side of his ribs. "Okay. Steve, have you ever seen Groundhog Day?"

Steve blinked. "No," he said again.

"You've got to be kidding me," said one of the agents, and it wasn't clear if he was responding to Tony or to Steve.

"Um," Tony said, finding his well-used speech already derailed. "That's... kind of inconvenient, I had a whole thing... Tell you what, can you pick five random words for me?"

"Tony," Loki said, shaking his head with a bit of a snicker.

"What," Tony said petulantly, and then realized what Loki was getting at. "Oh, come on! Cut me some slack, okay, I'm adjusting. This is hard."

"Adjusting to what?" Romanoff asked, sliding herself into the conversation.

"*Time*," Tony said impatiently; "don't tell me you haven't seen Groundhog Day either, someone help me out here."

Romanoff stared at him for a beat, then said in a tone even more expressionless than before, "You're saying you're trapped in a time-loop."

"*Was* trapped in a time-loop," Tony corrected. "We fixed it."

There was a flicker of something on Romanoff's face; she looked back and forth between him and Loki, nothing moving but her eyes. Steve just looked incredulous.

One of the agents took half a step forward. "Why don't you come in, the lab nerds can run some scans, verify your story."

"Look, this one has initiative," Loki said in a loud stage whisper. Tony elbowed him.

"Not that I'm calling you a liar," he said to the agent, "but, really, 'run some scans'? What, you're going to scan me with a magical time-loop scanner and see if it comes up yes for groundhogs? Actually, I admit it, I am calling you a liar. How stupid do you think I am, exactly?"

Loki opened his mouth and Tony elbowed him again, harder. "I wasn't asking *you*."

The agent made a point of moving his index finger well away from the trigger of his weapon, barrel pointed down and away. "I'm not a tech guy. All I know is, all kinds of things leave traces. Maybe they can tell, maybe they can't. If you're telling the truth, what does it hurt to try?"

Tony raised his eyebrows. "Surprisingly, I'm not in a terrific hurry to put myself in SHIELD's guiding hands. I've gone digging in those files. It turns out, there's no buried treasure. You know what there is? A lot of very shady activity. SHIELD's a lot shadier than it looks from the outside, and given that the outside looks like a clandestine government organization with limited regard for legal restrictions, that's... extremely shady."

He could feel Loki stir slightly next to him, and sighed. "...I just made you interested, didn't I."

"You, and the three gentlemen who are trying so hard not to look like they know *exactly* what you're talking about," Loki said, giving one of his shark smiles to the assault team. None of them looked tenser than any of the others to Tony. He was pretty sure Loki was just shit-stirring.

Tony turned his whole head to look at Loki directly. "Remember that talk we had about things that seem like an '*interesting*' idea at the time?"

"We did?" Loki asked innocently. "Hm, you'll have to refresh my memory."

"Something about your having poor impulse control."

Loki gave a light 'tsk'. "Now, that doesn't sound at all like me."

Tony rolled his eyes, but couldn't fight off a grin, because setting Loki on SHIELD really did sound hilarious. "Fine," he surrendered, because Loki wasn't the only one with poor impulse control. He stood up, pushing his chair back from the table. "Let's go play."

--

Aside from the guy with the bright idea to try talking Tony into coming into SHIELD, everyone mostly focused on Loki. It was kind of annoying, but on the other hand, Tony got to sit back and watch Loki have the time of his life being absolutely truthful in a hundred different misleading ways.

Romanoff stayed silent, typing on a tablet to disguise the fact that she was taking everything in, and Tony was starting to think he understood why Loki had said she was angry. He could be imagining it, but there seemed like a vibe... a little bit of a vibe. If it was there, it paled into insignificance next to the Righteously Clenched Jaw of Steve Rogers.

The truck ride was long and bumpy. Tony hung onto his stolen SHIELD weapon, because... because. He wasn't really sure why. Because it was a gift from Loki. Because some part of him was waiting for it to disappear and that was how he'd know the reset had happened. Because it annoyed the guy it had been stolen from. Whatever.

"I'm still not convinced about this guy's credentials," he said, referring to the agent driving. "How long has he had his license? What's his driving record like? Insurance - claim history?"

"He's fine," Steve said, even glancing away from Loki to say it.

Tony tapped his trigger finger against the carbine's lower receiver restlessly. "I'm just saying, I don't mind driving. I'm happy to drive."

"You're not driving."

"If we all crash and die," Tony said, scowling at Steve, "I blame you."

"Yeah," said Steve, back to watching Loki. "Copeland's driving isn't what I'm worried about."

--

The truck stopped in what looked like an underground parking lot. Steve put a hand on Tony's arm and said, "We're going to need that back."

Tony looked down at his new gun and looked back up at Steve. "Well, that sucks for you, because it's mine now."

Steve sent his dirty look to Loki, and that was starting to get really annoying. Tony shouldered in between them to glare at Steve. "He's not pulling my strings. This is me, standing here - surrounded by a bunch of heavily armed government agents - saying I'm not going anywhere without something in my hands to slightly level the playing field. Would you rather it was an Iron Man suit? I can call an Iron Man suit. Personally I think you're better off if all I've got is a single carbine, but that's just me."

Steve did the jaw clench again, and his eyes flickered briefly to Loki, but then Romanoff appeared next to them and said in a low voice, "He's right, Rogers. Let him have the gun."

Steve didn't look pleased but he took his hand off Tony's arm.

Tony eyed Romanoff dubiously and said, "Thanks."

"I think she's rather hoping you'll use it on me," Loki said drily.

Tony let his lips curl up a little. "Maybe you should be extra nice to me, then."

"Nice," Loki repeated, laughing a little. He reached for Tony's neck, fingers unerringly going straight for one of the bruised spots, making it flare up with fresh heat. "Is *that* how you want me to be--"

There were a lot of guns pointed at them all of a sudden. Pointed at Loki.

"*Hands off him*," Romanoff's voice rang out, and she looked somehow completely controlled and also like she was about three seconds away from slicing Loki's guts open.

"What the fuck," Tony said, trying to decide who to aim his own weapon at.

Loki lifted his hand slowly and took a step back. "Allow me to point out," he said, in the really pleasant voice he used when he was feeling especially murderous, "that if any of you imbeciles cause Tony to receive so much as a scratch due to your overblown posturing, I will not hesitate to raze this city to the ground."

"I can raze my own city, thank you very much," Tony retorted, but he had to admit it was a pretty nice feeling when Loki got all stab-happy on his behalf.

He aimed at Romanoff, mostly because the other SHIELD agents seemed to follow her lead. "I know you know I know how to use this-- wow, that was an awkward sentence. Everyone put your damn guns down. Actually, you know what? Yeah. Put them down, *on the ground*. Then we can all go in like friends without anyone overreacting and blowing someone's head off."

There was a pause. Tony saw someone start to move out of the corner of his eye, then Romanoff said fiercely, "Maintain your target."

"Seriously?" Tony said incredulously. "You think I won't shoot you?"

Romanoff looked at him over the holoscope of her weapon, still aimed unwaveringly at Loki. "If you do," she said, "it's not *you*. Remember that."

Tony blinked, then realized what she meant and sighed. "Right. Well, this is all very heart-warming, but all the more reason for me to want you people to *lose the weaponry*."

If they wouldn't do it for Romanoff's sake, then what would... Aha. He narrowed his eyes at her, then tilted his carbine upright, pushing the muzzle into the soft underside of his chin.

"Tony," Loki hissed.

Tony didn't take his eyes off Romanoff's. "Drop. The. Guns."

Her face didn't change. A moment later she lowered her weapon and gave a terse nod. The assault team started disarming; Tony backed up to make sure he could see them all, make sure there were no little surprises to come back and bite them.

"We are going to talk about this," Loki said, quiet and angry, "*later*."

"Sure thing, sugarpuff." Tony waited, not relaxing until every single weapon was on the ground; carbines, sidearms, the lot. No doubt some of them had back-up guns in ankle holsters - if not all of them - but that was a slow, inconvenient draw and Loki would have time to stop them.

He lowered his own gun, and flashed a sarcastic grin at Steve. "I'm feeling generous. You can keep the shield."

"Appreciate it," Steve said flatly.

"Now, then." Tony smiled, a hard-edged thing. "Lead on, MacDuffs."

--

Later, he realized he shouldn't have gotten cocky. He thought he'd taken control, so he got into the

elevator without thinking about SHIELD's resources and shady lines of research. He assumed the almost inaudible ringing noise was just shoddy maintenance, or something.

Until his vision started to swim, and one of the helmeted agents slumped sideways, and oh, *that* was why Romanoff had braced herself in a corner--

He passed out.

#

A Cat May Murder a King

Chapter Summary

Fortunately, SHIELD knows just how to rescue an unwillingly brainwashed innocent from Loki's clutches.

Unfortunately, that has no bearing on groundhogs.

Chapter Notes

I am trying to be more diligent about replying to comments but I tend to freeze up and second-guess myself and assume anything I say will sound, um, "bad" in some illogical, undefined way....?? Anyway, I just wanted to take this opportunity to assure you all how much I really truly appreciate every single comment. Thank you all. <3

"Good morning, sir. It's seven a.m., Thursday fourteenth. The weather in New York City is thirty-five degrees and clear, with an expected high of fifty-four."

Tony stared at Romanoff. He wanted to ask what the hell she was playing at. He was going to ask what the hell she was playing at. He was definitely going to ask that.

What came out of his mouth was, "Hold all calls, cancel all reminders."

"Is that it," she said softly, half a question. "A control phrase?"

"You're not Jarvis," Tony said, pushing himself up a little. His heart was going too fast. This wasn't his bedroom. He was on a bed, maybe a quarter the size of his actual bed, and next to the bed was a chair that Romanoff was sitting in. It was too *early* for anything to be new, he'd only just woken up, he hadn't had time to affect anything.

"No," Romanoff agreed. "Should I be?"

"Uh, yes. That's how the day starts." The room was small and gray and distinctly lacking in anything electronic. There was a mirror that almost certainly had people on the other side. Tony pushed up some more until he was sitting fully upright and rubbed at the corners of his eyes.

The Bifrost, they'd connected an arc reactor to the Bifrost and jumped forward in time to get out of the time-loop. But, that was in a previous version so shouldn't they be back in there, now? They hadn't done it yet this time.

But they'd done it so it *wouldn't* reset. To get back to... time. Time that moved forward. It was Friday now and people remembered things.

"That was a neat trick earlier," Romanoff said; "with the clothes."

But that had been-- no, *not* the previous version; it was all part of the same joined up stretch of time. *Days*, plural.

Despite knowing that, anxiety fluttered in Tony's throat at the strangeness. This wasn't his bed and it wasn't his bedroom and nobody was supposed to be here. Breathe, remember to breathe. "Right," he said out loud, trying to get a handle on it. "You... remember that."

Romanoff studied his face. "You've been interacting with me, and I haven't remembered things." She paused, and then nodded slightly, as if to herself. "The same day, right, Tony? You talk to me, and then you have the same day, and I don't remember the one that just happened."

"Exactly," Tony said, latching on to that with some relief. He might have woken up in the wrong place but *this* was a topic he understood. It was a lot easier if they just--

"And Loki told you that you were trapped in a time-loop."

--believed him.

"I *am* trapped in a time-loop," Tony said, with a bit of irritation. No, Bifrost, that was the point of it. "--Was. I mean, I was."

Romanoff tilted her head slightly, studying him. "Did you know, when Thor and Loki speak, I hear them in Russian?"

Huh. Did he know that? Tony wasn't sure if it had come up. That actually made sense, come to think of it. "Your first language."

Romanoff gave him a small, sad smile. "Tony... why do I hear you in Russian now?"

"Like, right now, 'now'?" Tony said in surprise. He blinked, absorbing the implications. "Loki gave me that Asgardian language mojo - obviously - but I didn't realize I was doing it all the time. I mean, when we went traipsing around the world I could talk to people, but I... guess I just assumed it was only switched on when I was in another country? I have no idea why I thought that, that's patently ridiculous."

Romanoff paused, looking like she was trying to decide what to ask first. "Did Loki say why he gave you that ability?"

"So I could learn to do magic." Tony considered Loki's attitude in general, and conceded, "And realistically - probably to see if he could. But mostly the magic."

"Can you explain that for me, Tony?"

Again with the first name. Tony raised an eyebrow at her and held it just long enough to make it clear that he knew what she was doing. He answered the question anyway, though. Focusing on things he understood was helping him feel a bit steadier, though there was still an uncomfortable hollow pit in his stomach. "Spells require particular words or sounds in order to function, but Loki doesn't know any of them because he uses All-Speak. So, he made it so I could do the same. Instead of incantations, just communicate directly with the universe."

"...I see," Romanoff said blandly. It was almost the tone of voice Tony would have used if he was trying really hard not to say something deeply sarcastic.

Tony wagged his finger at her. "That wasn't an open-ended question, Agent. Poor interview technique."

"Do you remember what Thor told us, Tony?" Romanoff asked, which *also* wasn't an open-ended question, and then she went ahead and answered it for him anyway. "About Loki's supposed death?"

He said that he'd given up on Loki. He said that he told Loki he believed that nothing remained of the brother he'd once known."

"Yeah, well." Tony shifted uncomfortably, ignoring the weird twinge in his gut. "Loki's thing with Thor is really up to him."

"It would be nice if that was true," Romanoff said, allowing just a hint of acid in her tone. "But he's involved you."

Well, *this* was new. Tony cocked his head, keen to see where she was going with this. "I can pretty confidently say Loki has made zero attempts to drag me along to talk to Thor."

"No," Romanoff agreed. "Thor gave up on him. So Loki found someone else. Someone he could mold into the sort of brother he wanted. A brother who wasn't stronger than him. A brother he could control. A brother who was on his side."

Oh. Oh, *wow*. "That is seriously twisted," Tony said, not sure whether he admired her mind or was horrified by it. "Okay, first of all, I guarantee you that the way Loki thinks about me is *anything* but brotherly--"

Romanoff shook her head, dismissing that. "Incidental," she said. "It's the companionship. Intimacy."

Tjoklås.

Well, she was... partly right. It hadn't been part of any evil master plan, though. Not the kind she was thinking.

"Tony," Romanoff said intently, leaning forward to hold Tony's gaze. "He got into your head. He made you think you spoke with us. He made you think we forgot. Over and over again."

"That's really not what--"

"The All-Speak, the magic? He's fashioning you in his image. You have to see that, Tony."

"The way your mind works is very creepy, Agent, I want you to know--"

"Good morning, sir," Romanoff said, her eyes boring into his, "it's seven a.m., Thursday fourteenth--"

"Stop it," Tony hissed, flinching despite himself. He didn't know why he didn't want her to say it; it just felt wrong.

--The weather in New York City is thirty-five degrees and clear--"

"Stop it," he repeated, louder.

--with an expected high of fifty-four."

Hold all calls-- Tony jumped off the bed, dragging a hand through his hair in agitation. His heart was racing and his stomach felt hard and tight. "I don't have to listen to this!"

"Good morning, sir, it's seven a.m., Thursday--"

"It's not a damn *control phrase*, Romanoff, it's just how the day starts, haven't you ever heard of an alarm clock?"

--in New York City is thirty-five degrees--"

Tony closed his eyes and threw himself into the mind-set for magic, that hazy hyper-awareness of his own skin, energy flowing through everything. If he reached outwards... The mirror was the first thing to catch his attention: such a regular, even structure. It took barely any energy to just add a little pressure and *shatter*--

He opened his eyes and where the mirror had been were two men pointing handguns at him, one a dark guy in leather who seemed vaguely familiar but maybe that was just the eye-patch. Tony narrowed his eyes at the guns and this time when he reached out he didn't aim to break them apart; he disintegrated the molecules entirely, and wasn't all that careful about making sure the excess energy was left on an astral dimension. There might have been a couple of small explosions.

Something rammed into him from the side and knocked him onto the ground. Tony could feel broken glass crunch underneath him. Before he could do more than grunt, there was a sharp blow to the side of his head.

--

Tony's head hurt.

Also, his stomach hurt.

This was definitely not first thing in the morning.

"About damn time you woke up," said a grumpy sounding voice. "I was beginning to think Agent Romanoff might have hit you too hard."

"My stomach hurts," Tony said, opening his eyes a tiny fraction. It was way too bright. He decided a tiny fraction was enough.

"She didn't hit you in the stomach. I was watching, you might recall."

Tony didn't, entirely, which wasn't much of a surprise if he'd been (as it felt) *hit in the head*. Few minutes retrograde amnesia, probably.

Squinting hurt too much. He closed his eyes again and covered them with a hand.

Normally if he was injured when they were playing superhero or supervillain or just being a bit too adventurous, Loki was there to make fun of him. (Or fuss over him, mother hen.) What time was it? Loki had to have arrived by now.

Romanoff hit him. Romanoff remembered him creating clothes.

Tony tried to feel for his skin, feel for the universe around him, but the pain in his head flared up sharply. He groaned unhappily. He just wanted to reach out to find out if Loki was nearby.

This version sucked. Day. This day sucked. They definitely shouldn't do this one again.

The grumpy guy said, "I don't suppose you're going to make things easy on me and tell me you woke up in your right mind."

"Probable concussion," Tony pointed out irritably. "By definition, no."

"Allow me to rephrase. You still inclined to play personal butt-monkey for that megalomaniac asswipe?"

For a fraction of a second, Tony toyed with the idea of playing along, just to see how far being cooperative would get him. He dismissed the idea quickly. Sore and annoyed did not make for a cooperative Tony Stark.

Besides, they probably wouldn't believe him.

"Either make yourself useful and hand over some painkillers," he ground out, "or quit bothering me."

"Yeah," the man said with a bit of a sigh. "That's what I was afraid of."

Tony could hear him moving away. He lowered the hand from his eyes and rolled onto his left side, away from the direction the light seemed to be coming from. Fortunately it was the right side of his head that throbbed the most.

The pain in his stomach was a different sort of pain; a sort of tight, uncomfortable knot. Pressing against it didn't seem to make it worse, so he did that, pushing with the flat of his hand to make it seem less concentrated. God, he couldn't wait for this one to be over.

Distantly he heard the unknown man say, "All yours, doc," and there was another set of footsteps.

"Mister Stark," said yet another unfamiliar voice. "I'm just going to shine a quick light in your eyes--"

"Oh, hell no," Tony muttered, but he rolled onto his back again. Bracing himself, he opened his eyes a crack, squinting for a few seconds before he tried to go any further. A balding white guy with glasses and a lab coat was leaning over him.

"Open your eyes for me please, that's right..." Tiny penlight with an obscenely bright bulb; Tony flinched and shoved the guy's arm away.

"All right," the doctor said implacably, "one more time please..."

Fucker. Tony forced himself to endure it, then closed his eyes as soon as he could and flung the back of an arm over them.

"How's your hearing, any ringing in your ears, anything like that?"

"No," Tony said, forcing himself to be patient. He wanted to snap and snark. He also wanted to curl up and not do anything for a while. "'Sfine."

"Okay. I'm going to take your hands - I want you to squeeze both of mine as hard as you can." The doctor waited for that, then moved down the bed and put his hands under the soles of Tony's feet. Someone had taken his shoes off him. "Now push against my hands... that's it. And push up... very good. Any difference in sensation?"

"No." He could hear the doctor walking back up the bed.

"Do you know what day it is?"

"Funny," Tony grumbled.

"Mister Stark, please. I'm just checking for signs--"

"Of brain injury, I know." Not Thursday. Not Thursday. "It's Friday," Tony said, carefully and deliberately. It felt *weird*.

The doctor paused oddly. "And can you name the president for me?"

"What was that?" Tony asked warily, mistrusting the pause. He shifted his arm enough to squint an eye up at the doctor. "It's not Friday? ...It's Thursday." He should have gone with that the first time, he *knew* Friday didn't make any sense, there was no such--

"Saturday, actually," said the doctor.

Tony stared at him uncomprehendingly.

"It's all right," the doctor said. "A little memory loss can happen, there's no need to panic. I'll just ask you a couple more questions--"

"I don't--" Tony closed his eye again, head swimming. "I don't understand. You're... confused."

"It's all right, Mister Stark," the doctor repeated, gently.

Tony almost shook his head, then thought better of it. He focused on his breathing, on staying calm. Less steadily than he'd like, he said, "I think I'd like to speak to Loki now."

The silence that followed made his stomach sink. He tried again to get in the mind-state for magic. His head throbbed and he couldn't focus. Saturday. Friday. Freaking pixie dust and fairyland. Stupid bleeding snake metaphor. The universe was just... particles, okay, little bits of information, tiny pieces of code, zeroes and ones. Loki could call it stories if he wanted, but it was programming at its core.

More firmly, Tony said, "I want to speak to Loki."

The first guy, the grumpy one, spoke up. "He's not here."

"Bullshit." Loki would be here. Loki promised he would always show up. Loki needed Tony as much as Tony needed him.

"He left you behind, Stark," the man said, almost challengingly. "Saw an opportunity, and took it. Killed three of my best agents on the way out."

That didn't sound right. Tony had fought at Loki's side more times than he could count and if Loki had actually felt threatened-- He frowned skeptically. "Only three?"

An angry huff. "I'm telling you, Stark, that fucker left you here without a second thought. You are *disposable* to him."

They were lying. Tony knew it with certainty, and that meant that they'd done something to Loki. Fear and rage washed through him. Those sons of bitches--

"Your super-powered boyfriend dumped your ass to save his own skin. Now, what do you make of that?"

Tony threw himself deep into his body, calling on every shred of that hyper-awareness he could muster. The universe sprang into sharp relief around him: energy states and delicate dancing orbits. *Loki*, he thought intently, reaching out. Pain throbbed through everything. It didn't matter. *Loki*.

He could only get a decent sense of what existed within a few feet of himself, then the world pulsed out of focus. Pain tore through his skull. He turned his head and retched. A spatter of thin fluid came up, nothing more. His eyes were watering, a few drops slipping out even from behind

closed lids.

Okay, bad. Bad idea. Very bad idea.

"Director, I highly recommend this wait," the doctor said in a low, tense voice that reverberated *way too loud* through Tony's skull. "Mister Stark, how are you feeling? Do you feel like you're going to vomit again?"

Tony made a small noise that was definitely not a whimper. "If I move," he mumbled. As witty retorts went... not his best effort. He dragged his arm far enough to wipe the side of his mouth with his shirt sleeve. His jaw was all prickly around his goatee.

"When was the last time you ate, do you remember?"

Ate? That question didn't make any sense. Tony started to squint an eye open, then quickly closed it again. Okay, dark good, nice and dark. "Don't usually bother."

There was a mutter, something about starving him, and the doctor said, "The blood tests didn't indicate serious malnourishment - right now I'm more concerned about the head injury, I'd like to get him in a CT--"

"He already blew up two handguns and a mirror, Doctor, and you want to put him near a piece of equipment that size?"

"Not the size that counts," Tony muttered, and managed a weak chuckle. Slightly better line. Oh, god, his head was pounding. Although apparently he'd blown up a couple of guns, that was kind of neat.

"Right now he doesn't seem to be much of a threat."

"That is where you're wrong. Before, he was unpredictable but containable. Now he's got enhanced abilities and he's been compromised by a hostile extra-terrestrial force. This is exactly the kind of threat we need to worry about."

That seemed... bad. That seemed like a bad thing. SHIELD was not too picky about how they eliminated threats.

Loki should be here.

It was a shame they couldn't just blast through a wall and call 'beam me up, Spotty' like Odin had, and that-- *almost* reminded him of something, it was just out of reach. It was a saying, it was a... teleportation, science fiction, reference to something... He had the vaguest impression of a red pullover.

Concentrating that hard hurt like the devil. The back of his throat convulsed and Tony had to fight not to throw up again.

"Yeah," said the doctor, voice thick with sarcasm. "I see what you mean."

Well, that was patronizing.

Tony's head throbbed but it wasn't completely overwhelming anymore. It was tempting to just curl up and wait until this all ended, but they might be hurting Loki. Were probably hurting Loki.

There was a quiet noise, a voice he couldn't quite make out. Someone swore. "I'm on my way."

Doctor - deal with your patient."

"Yes, sir."

An irritated noise, a door opening and closing. One down.

The doctor muttered something that Tony couldn't make out. Tony gave a small whimper, trying to make himself sound harmless and pitiful. Admittedly that... wasn't very difficult.

"Don't worry, Mister Stark," the doctor said. There was clear disapproval in his voice. "I'm just going to go find out what sort of equipment is available at this facility. If I don't return immediately I'll make sure someone checks on you."

Tony made a tiny noise of acknowledgement, not moving.

"Don't go anywhere," the doctor added, in a tone that suggested he thought he was being funny. Tony bit his tongue.

He waited for the door to close again. Then he waited a little longer, psyching himself up. This was going to suck.

Okay. Take it easy. Nice and slow. Tony felt around for the edge of the bed and carefully eased himself closer. Turned onto his stomach. Tried to keep his weight on his upper half while he shifted his legs off the bed and felt for the floor with his socked feet. Okay, good.

He pushed up onto his elbows next, still leaning heavily on the bed. His head swam, but he was... managing. He was going to need to see, though, and he wasn't looking forward to that part.

"I," he reminded himself under his breath, "am Iron Man." He could do this. He could do anything.

Tony braced himself, and half-opened his eyes to the sight of an off-white bed sheet. The right side of his head throbbed. Slowly, he eased himself upright until he was mostly standing, hands still pressed to the mattress for support. Everything was spinning dangerously and he had to wait for the vertigo to subside.

"I am Iron Man," he repeated, determined. There was a wall - gridded metal - on the opposite side of the bed and he followed it with his eyes. The door was a couple of feet past the foot of the bed. He could do that. No problem; one step at a time.

He leaned on the bed until he got to the foot of it, then he leaned on the wall. He stopped at the door and listened intently. Faint but there: a muffled voice. Conversation. Guards, then, outside the door. Fuck.

Tony pressed his forehead against the wall for a moment, trying to think. He'd have to try to move fast and that was going to be... unpleasant.

Iron. Be iron.

Very concussed iron.

The door had a simple bar handle; Tony braced one hand on the wall and grasped the handle with the other. Three, two... pull - he stepped through and slammed his foot against the knee of the guard in his line of sight at the same time as he grabbed at the gun and yanked with all his strength.

The world reeled around him and the doorframe slammed into his back. Tony stumbled, trying to

find his footing; someone grabbed him, pulled - his knees hit the ground, then the rest of him a moment later, tugged half sideways so his left temple landed on something kind of firm and squishy.

Also, he'd dropped the gun.

"Fuck," Tony said raggedly. His head was protesting all that movement in no uncertain terms. He could feel hands carefully roll him onto his back; that had been a hand under his temple, saving him from another hard hit.

"You done?" one of the guards asked, sounding amused. Bastard.

"Yep." Tony swallowed his despair, and felt around until he felt someone's leg to pat. "Thanks for the assist."

"No problem."

The world was spinning way too hard given that Tony was lying flat on the ground. His head throbbed and he could feel tears under his eyelids again, frustration and pain.

Someone snorted, Tony thought it might have been the same guard, then dissolved into laughter. The other one snapped, "Oh, shut up."

"Dude. You just... got mugged... by a concussed, brainwashed civilian," the laughing guard gasped out.

Guard Two groaned. "I'm not going to live this down, am I."

"I'm not brainwashed," Tony said petulantly. He wasn't exactly a *civilian*, either. He hated being patronized and he hated this concussion and he hated how nothing made sense since they'd rejigged the Bifrost. He hadn't felt this miserable in a long time. "I was trapped in a time-loop. Why is that so hard to... you don't need to answer that."

"Sure, Stark, a time-loop," Guard One said agreeably. "Let's get you up and back to the bed, how does that sound?"

Tony groaned at the thought of movement. "I'm good here." He paused, then added without much hope, "Unless you want to make an easy half mil each, and help me stage a daring rescue?"

"Sure, sounds like fun."

That was unexpectedly easy. Tony's brow furrowed, which made his head hurt worse so he quickly stopped. "Really?"

"No, Stark," Guard Two said patiently. "Come on, let's sit you up."

Tony swore under his breath, but he let them pull him up onto his ass. There was a whiff of something unpleasant, but given that his mouth still tasted like stale vomit, he didn't worry about it too much.

"Careful, Campbell," Guard One teased. "He might go for your gun again."

"Bite me," muttered Guard Two - Campbell.

Tony put a hand on his stomach, more aware of the pain there now that his head was settling a little, again. "I thought SHIELD agents weren't allowed a sense of humor."

"We have to keep it on the down-low," Guard One deadpanned. "Strictly don't ask, don't tell."

If they weren't stopping him from finding Loki, he could possibly like these guys. Well. Also if they didn't work for a really ethically screwed up organization.

Tony sat there for a little longer, wishing he could think properly. Or walk without falling over. Either would be an improvement, at this point.

"Do you think you're ready to stand up?" Campbell asked.

Before Tony could answer, he heard multiple sets of footsteps coming closer, and the grumpy voice from earlier: "What is this, a tea party?"

"No, sir," Guard One said, abruptly crisp and serious. "The prisoner attempted to escape, and is briefly recuperating before we assist him back inside his cell, sir."

"Tony Stark is your prisoner?" asked *yet another* voice, one that was oddly easy to listen to, but how many people were wandering around here, this was ridiculous.

Tony turned his head a little and squinted at the new arrivals. Eye-patch guy, armored dude that was obviously Thor, and a man and woman in SHIELD uniforms behind them.

If eye-patch guy was the man everyone was calling 'sir' and 'Director' then that was Nick Fury, and therefore dangerous. Thor, though... Thor could go either way. Tony gave a half-hearted little wave, trying not to disturb the dull throb of his head. "Yeah, that's me."

Thor took a step forward, then looked back at Fury, frowning. "What is the meaning of this?"

Thor was the one with the easy voice. It didn't seem to take as much effort to process. Huh.

Fury started to fold his arms, then stopped and let them hang by his side. There were thick dressings on both of his hands. Oh, please let that be from the guns Tony had apparently exploded. "You can thank your not-so-dead little brother for that. He's up to his old mind games, and this time they're not so easy to break."

Tony sighed and made eye contact with Thor. "They think that Loki brainwashed me."

"And did he?" Thor asked drily.

"No." Tony started to roll his eyes and oh god, no, that hurt way more than it should. "If anything, I brainwashed him. Let me be clear, by 'brainwashed' I mean he was overcome by my incredible natural charisma."

Fury muttered something inaudible but probably not complimentary. Thor looked at Tony a moment longer, eyes sharp and thoughtful, then seemed to come a decision.

"All the more reason for me to speak to Loki."

Tony saw his chance and said hastily, "I'm coming, too."

"The hell you are," Fury retorted. "Garcia, Campbell, get him back in his room."

"No," Tony insisted, climbing onto his hands and knees, then just his knees. "I've played along with your bullshit--"

"You call exploding shit with your brain 'playing along'?!"

"--now take me to Loki." He leaned on the SHIELD agent who was presumably Garcia in order to make it all the way to his feet. Ohhhh god, spinning. Lots of spinning.

"Stark will accompany us, and answer my questions," Thor declared, in a tone that brooked no argument.

"Director?" Garcia asked, one hand under Tony's elbow to support him, the other on his back.

Fury clenched his teeth, then said, "Agents, with me. *Watch* him."

Tony relaxed a little. He gave a sly glance to the agent on his other side, Campbell. "Any chance you'd lend me your gun?"

Campbell jerked his gun a little further away from Tony, looking annoyed and embarrassed. Garcia choked back something suspiciously close to laughter.

"You are unsteady on your feet," Thor observed, striding closer. "Allow me to assist you." He offered an arm for Tony to lean on, then as soon as Tony took hold of it clamped his other hand over top of Tony's.

"Clever," Tony muttered. He could lean on Thor, but he couldn't get away.

"Indeed." Thor gave a grim smile. "Director, if you would lead the way. A little slower, I think."

It was probably a lot slower, given how unsteady Tony was, but Thor seemed pretty intent on politely interrogating him as they went. "When last I was on this realm, Stark, you disappeared quite suddenly. Perhaps you would tell me what has happened these past two weeks, from your perspective?"

Tony floundered for a moment; all he could think was that he didn't even remember the first version of the day, let alone what was supposed to have happened in the two weeks 'before' it. But, that wasn't what Thor meant. He took a breath and released it, trying to get the... timeline... straight in his head.

It would probably be better *not* to say he'd been stuck in a time-loop, but the problem was he'd already said it to SHIELD, and SHIELD remembered him saying it.

Being stuck with the consequences of a conversation was going to take so much re-adjusting.

"Some of it's a little... personal," Tony said, thinking of Loki's attempt at suicide via time travel paradox. "Um, long story short, time... got damaged." He glanced at Thor's face.

Thor's expression was annoyingly neutral. "Go on."

Tony grimaced and ploughed ahead, all too aware of exactly how ridiculous this sounded. "Loki and I were both stuck in the same day, and it kept repeating over and over--"

"Like the saga of Groundhog Day," Thor said in a tone of understanding.

Tony gave a shaky laugh. It sounded a little hysterical even to himself. He felt like he was going crazy. Crazier? Sure, Thor had seen Groundhog Day, why not. "Yeah. Something like that. So uh... we had to work together to solve it. We figured out how to travel into the future to get past the temporal distortion. That's why I disappeared, because I left that time and came to-- now. Friday. The twenty-ninth, Jarvis said? I'm still not really used to Friday being an actual day that exists."

"It's Saturday," Campbell said helpfully.

Tony flinched, not liking the twist of confused anxiety in his chest. "By the way, Fury, this guy needs remedial close-quarters combat lessons, I totally got his gun off him earlier."

"Screw you, Stark, this is why people like Captain America more."

"Agent Campbell," Fury said curtly.

Campbell straightened, wiping the irritation off his face. "Yes sir, sorry sir."

"You and I will have words."

"Yes, sir."

Tony smirked to himself, not above a little petty revenge. He *loved* petty revenge.

"Hm," Thor said, still giving nothing away. "Loki fought you before. But from what you said, I gather you believe he is now something of an ally."

"Ally," Fury repeated harshly. "That's a hell of a word for th--"

Thor interrupted in a steely voice, "*Director*. I would hear what Tony Stark has to say."

Tony glared at the back of Fury's leather coat. He really, really hoped he was responsible for the dressings on Fury's hands. "We got to know each other. He's..." How could he even explain what Loki was to him now? What he was to Loki? "There's a word from Jotunheim. *Tjoklās*. About starting in conflict."

Thor stopped short in the middle of the corridor. "He spoke to you of Jotunheim?" He sounded astonished.

Tony took the opportunity to close his eyes for a bit, resting them. It took him slightly by surprise to realize he wanted to tell Thor about it. To tell *someone*. How long had it had been since he'd-- *Had* he really talked to anyone but Loki? About anything that mattered? Instead of just... saying whatever phrases he needed to get the right response.

"You need to understand," he said slowly, "it was..." Everything. All that they knew. "It just kept repeating. I couldn't count them. Loki... You can only hate a place for so long before you get bored and go back. You want to know if it's really the horrifying image you've built it up to be."

For a moment Tony could smell sand. He opened his eyes partway again, but he didn't look up at Thor's expression and he didn't look at anyone else. "He tried out a lot of versions of... I mean, he went to Jotunheim a lot. He wanted to know what it was really like. Before he found out I was in the same, you know, condition, time-wise. Then he was mostly on Earth with me."

"I see," Thor said thoughtfully. He took a small step forwards, and Tony took the hint to start moving again. "And your All-Speak, how does that fit in to this?"

Could everyone tell Tony was using that now? "We figured out I needed it to learn magic, so Loki waved his magic wand and made it happen."

"Loki has a wand now," Thor said, half a question.

Tony put his free hand across his forehead to squeeze his temples gently - forefingers on one side, thumb on the other. "It's a figure of speech. He used that spear - Gugnir."

He felt Thor's arm tense under his grasp, but Thor didn't stop walking this time. "Only the king can wield Gungnir."

Gungnir. Right. Same thing. "Well... he was kind of king at the time."

From in front of them Fury said, "My understanding was that he was in *prison*. Before getting himself, apparently, not dead enough."

Tony smirked a little, seeing another opportunity to annoy that asshole. "Actually, for a while he was ruling Asgard in disguise as the Allfather."

Thor's arm got even tenser. Fury let out a string of colorful curses.

"That's why it looked like Odin disappeared the same day I did," Tony explained sweetly. "*That* was Loki. We came here. Here as in the cycle of time, not here as in this physical building. Obviously. And he gave the spear back to Odin. I'm... pretty sure that's still happened. Stayed happened? I'm not even... I don't think there's grammar for this, I don't care. The point is, Odin's gone home, I think."

"He has," Thor agreed. "It was my father who sent me here to speak to Loki. Though I was also eager to aid in the search for you, Tony Stark, if you had not yet been freed."

Tony snorted lightly. "That might be up for debate."

Thor made a contemplative sound. "When I was first summoned back to Asgard, I asked Heimdall to seek you out, yet he could find no trace of you. As if you were indeed not present at that point in the cycle of time."

The one woman among the SHIELD agents said, "You can't seriously be entertaining this."

"I have been hasty before in my decisions, Lady Hill, and come to regret it. The Allfather has sent me to gather information, and that is what I intend to do."

That wasn't a yes but it wasn't a no either. Was there actually a chance Thor believed him? That was... weirdly refreshing.

"Stark," Thor continued, "you said my brother wished to teach you magic."

Someone, Tony couldn't quite place who, exhaled sharply. He guessed SHIELD were a bit touchy about that part. "Yeah, I've leveled up," he told Thor, aiming for a touch of confidence in his voice. "My *buddies* here have already seen a couple of tricks out of my repertoire. You'll have to excuse me for not spilling the beans on everything Loki taught me to do, I like to keep a little in reserve."

If they hadn't figured out that the concussion was stopping him from unleashing hell on them, there was no need to clue them in. They might have guessed, but a little bluff couldn't hurt to try.

"Is that true?" Thor asked, apparently not directing the question at Tony. "Have you seen him perform magic with your own eyes?"

"Unfortunately," Fury gritted out. There was the sound of leather moving against leather; maybe Fury making some kind of motion to do with his hands?

Thor's hand pressed a little harder on Tony's, just slightly, probably unconsciously. "And Stark, Loki did not begin to teach you until this... temporal distortion you speak of. The fourteenth day of the eleventh month of your Midgardian calendar. You are quite certain?"

"Yes," Tony said, feeling a little uneasy at the urgent tone of Thor's voice. "It took a lot of different versions of the day before I started to get anywhere; I'd still be stuck if we'd, if time was... working. Why does it matter?"

"Indeed," Thor said, frowning a little. "You could not have learned such magic were the days progressing at a normal pace, certainly not within a single waning of the moon."

There was a chorus of protests around them, from slightly bewildered to Fury's outraged, "You have *got* to be kidding me."

It seemed too simple. Tony was almost afraid to hope. "What are you saying? You believe me?"

"I believe that you have experienced something outside the normal course of time," Thor said soberly. The group was coming to a stop; Tony could see the bottom of Fury's coat move as Fury turned around. "That does not mean Loki has not influenced your mind. I... no longer trust myself to know what he would or would not be willing to do."

"Everyone's assuming I couldn't just *like* him," Tony said irritably. He was leaning more heavily on Thor, exhausted from the conversation and their slow trip down the corridor. "Got a real high opinion of your brother, there, Thor."

"You're talking about someone who tried to conquer New York," the woman said incredulously.

"Please," Tony huffed. This conversation was annoying him and he really wanted to lie down, preferably before his body made the decision for him and just collapsed. "That was years ago."

Fury said, not quite snapping but definitely a little aggressive, "That little clusterfuck was *last year*."

Oh. "Oh," Tony said. He didn't really have a good comeback for that.

Fury did some things to a panel on the wall. The beeps it made were painfully high-pitched, piercing through Tony's skull. He pressed his hand to his head and mentally recited a string of swearwords.

"Here," Fury said - probably to Thor - as a set of doors slid open.

"If you would," Thor began, taking his hand off Tony's. He was clearly about to pass Tony off to someone, and Tony had no intention of being stopped if they were this close.

He called on every shred of his willpower to barge forward into the room, aiming for the first kind of leanable-on object that caught his eye. He meant to brace his hands on it but kind of collapsed onto his forearms, head swimming and tears springing to his eyes. He could feel his heartbeat thundering through his brain. It was like someone had hit him over the head all over again.

He could see legs. This was a steel table and those were legs and a medical gown and Loki with an IV line pumping... something... into his body. Tony stared, trying to catch his breath. His eyes slipped in and out of focus. He should sit down.

There were a lot of voices. A couple of phrases sank in: Fury insisting they'd told Thor they were 'keeping him contained', Thor demanding Loki be woken up. Tony half-lowered himself, half-collapsed onto the ground. He leaned against a table leg and pulled his knees up to rest his head on them.

...Ow.

He sat there while people bustled around, too exhausted to watch them. Vaguely he thought he should keep half an ear on things but processing words was just too much. Loki was here and everything else could wait until he felt less like his head was going to explode.

Someone dropped down to his side to try to talk to him and Tony batted at them irritably. "Go 'way."

They caught his hand and put fingers on his wrist. "Just going to take your pulse."

Whatever. Tony zoned out a little; drifted in and out of awareness. The next thing that actually mattered was Thor saying in a hard voice, "Loki, you can stop pretending. You think I cannot tell when you're awake?"

Tony felt a weird spike of jealousy at that. *He* couldn't tell when Loki was pretending to be unconscious. Meanly he muttered, "You apparently can't tell when he's Odin."

"Ah," Loki's voice said, like that was all he'd been waiting for. "Tony, how are you feeling? I need to decide how many of these wretches to kill."

The sound that followed next was probably everyone in the room shifting to aim their guns at Loki. Even Thor growled out, "*Loki...*" which was a bit rich, considering SHIELD were the ones who'd barged into the hotel room uninvited.

"I haven't decided," Tony gritted out. "Depends what they did while you were unconscious."

"He's paranoid," Fury said dismissively. "It was just for security. We've tried to hold your brother before and learned our lesson."

"There's a saying," Tony said, keeping his head on his knees. "Just because you're paranoid, doesn't mean they're not out to conduct fucked up experiments on aliens."

"You see a surplus of aliens around here, Stark?" Fury said sarcastically, but he'd paused too long before he said it.

"I am going to get off this bench," Loki said coldly, "and I strongly advise you not to make any threatening moves."

Tony grinned to himself, because trust Loki to face a roomful of humans with guns and assume that *he* outnumbered *them*. To be fair, if Thor wasn't here it would probably be true.

Loki slid off the table with a definite sound of boots, and when he crouched next to Tony there were faint creaks of shifting leather. No more medical gown, apparently.

A soothing hand ran over Tony's head, and he winced a little. "Careful of the right side," he mumbled. Loki made a dangerous noise in his throat.

"Loki," Thor repeated sternly. "I have questions for you."

"So ask them," Loki said, a little impatiently. He draped his hand over the back of Tony's neck and stroked gently with his thumb. Tony gave a soft sigh at the comfort.

"What are your intentions here?"

"To be honest, we haven't particularly discussed it. Our focus was on solving the immediate problem - I assume someone has informed you that I've supposedly brainwashed Tony Stark into

believing we were trapped in a time-loop?"

"They have," Thor said flatly. "Was it entirely necessary to fake your death - again?"

Loki's thumb paused in its gentle motions. "Sometimes, brother, you make it very difficult for me to want to reconcile with you."

"He didn't do it," Tony said grouchy, because he wanted the stroking back. "And you should probably stop accusing him of it."

"Loki?"

"Stark is correct on both counts," Loki said coolly, but his thumb started moving again. "I realize that it is much more preferable to believe I tricked you than to realize you left me on a dead world, unconscious and gravely wounded, but that is the truth."

Thor was silent for several seconds. "...And the throne?"

Loki admitted, sounding slightly embarrassed to Tony's ears, "I thought it would be fun."

Tony managed to snort a little. "You have weird ideas of fun."

"Oh, well, there was probably some nonsense in there about wanting to prove myself, given that my first stint on the throne was almost immediately greeted with mass treason--"

"There was no such thing!" Thor protested hotly.

"Thor, I will discuss that with you when we are not surrounded by weapons. If you have other questions, ask them, for I am swiftly losing patience with these mortals."

"Is that a threat?" Fury demanded.

"Almost certainly," Loki said darkly.

"These men are under my protection," Thor said in a hard voice. "If you attempt to wage war on Midgard, Loki, I will--"

"They attacked us and injured my beloved," Loki snarled. "The only reason any of them still stand is that I have not yet had the chance to discuss with Tony whether he wishes to remain on Midgard at all."

"Um, what?" Tony said blankly. Going anywhere else hadn't occurred to him. To be fair, not much had occurred to him. Loki was right that they hadn't really talked about what they'd do after getting out of the clot. The enormity of that task had kind of overwhelmed anything else.

"If you wish to remain, it might make things difficult for you if I slaughter them," Loki said reasonably. "I thought I should at least speak to you before making a decision I cannot reverse."

"No, yeah, I get that." Tony turned his head carefully, and opened his eyes a little to look at Loki. "I just hadn't thought about... anywhere else."

"You *get that*," Fury said incredulously. "Motherfucker talks about mass murder and you *get that*? And you don't think he's messed with your head?"

Hypocritical son of a bitch. Tony decided it was worth it to lift his head enough to glare at Fury. "Don't pretend you have a problem with mass murder. Or with *crossing off* people you've decided

are a threat. The only difference is Loki wants to kill you because you actually attacked us, not because you've got some ability that creeps him out."

Fury narrowed his eye. "You don't know what you're talking about, Stark."

"I know more than you think," Tony said in a low voice. He'd hacked SHIELD more than any other agency - just to reassure himself he hadn't imagined the fucked up things in those files. It got worse the more encrypted they were, right down to the stuff that set off alarms and brought troops to his door to arrest him.

They didn't get to judge him about *shit*.

Trying to think enough to talk was making the throb in his head worsen again. He tucked his face back against his knees and gave a huff of pain and irritation. He could feel Loki touch the bruised side of his head and he winced, making a noise of complaint.

Loki shushed him gently. "Allow me, *tjokläs*."

For a moment nothing happened, then the throbbing and the ache eased. Tony's head felt about a hundred times clearer. Even the ground felt more stable beneath him.

"Oh," he breathed in relief. "That's so much better." Pity Loki hadn't done his stomach as well, but the concussion had been the most obvious problem.

Tony ducked out from under the table and stood up, folding his arms. He smiled sharply at Thor and Fury as Loki rose to join him. "Right. Thor backs me up on the time-loop. There is no evidence of Loki brainwashing me, because, as it happens, he didn't. So we're going to walk on out of here and you're going to let us--"

"I think you're forgetting that he's still a wanted war criminal," Fury interrupted.

Oh yeah. Tony tried not to let his expression show that he had, in fact, briefly forgotten that. "So tell me how many life sentences he's due, because I think we can make a pretty good case for time served."

That was kind of bullshit, because he actually had *no* idea how many versions they'd lived through. Years? Decades? Centuries? He hadn't been able to keep track and even if he could have, he probably wouldn't have bothered. The whole idea of comparing it to 'real' time seemed kind of meaningless. It *wasn't* time, and that defined everything about it.

Fury was arguing back that that wasn't how courts worked - as if they'd had *any* intention of letting Loki see the inside of a courtroom. Thor, on the other hand, took a step towards Loki and asked intently, "Loki, do you truly care for Tony Stark?"

"More than you could imagine," Loki answered, the most sincere and serious Tony had ever seen him. "He is a part of myself. As though we were... entangled on a quantum level."

"Oh my god," Tony said dreamily. "That was a declaration of love through physics. I'm keeping you. I mean, that wasn't really in doubt, but I just had to say it again."

There was some muttering from the SHIELD people. Tony was pretty sure he heard both 'traitor' and 'faggot' from different parts of the room, and he could have come up with a snappy insult back but he honestly just didn't give a fuck.

Thor ignored all of them, eyes fixed on Loki. "Do you mean harm to Midgard, other than in his

defense?"

"I would go so far as to say that if he likes, I *might* even act in Midgard's defense." Loki quirked a smile that said he knew exactly how much he was angering the SHIELD agents.

"And have you influenced his mind in any way?"

"Not in the way you're thinking," Loki said carefully. "I did strengthen its connection to his memories a little, with his full and free consent. And the All-Speak, of course."

Fury huffed and tried another angle, scowling at Tony. "I guess we know how much respect you have for Agent Coulson's memory."

Tony racked his memory for the name and oh, hey, more shady SHIELD shit. "That was the guy who got transferred to Tahiti, right?"

Fury, Hill, and another agent all stiffened. Thor glanced at Fury then narrowed his eyes at what he saw there. "Coulson fell in battle."

"Oh my," Loki murmured, smirking. "Isn't this interesting."

"That's one word for it," Tony said, glaring harder at Fury as he remembered a little more about the relevant files. "Pretty sure if Thor hadn't shown up they were planning on turning you into Tahiti two point oh."

"That's a classified project, Stark," Fury snapped. "And it was shut down years ago."

"What is this Tahiti?" Thor demanded.

Tony cast his eyes around the room as Fury tried to bullshit Thor. Hill had a handgun, there were four agents with carbines - including Garcia and Campbell - and two men and a woman in lab coats, who also had handguns. The scientists were eyeing Loki nervously, presumably a lot more comfortable when the aliens they were dealing with were dead or unconscious. Nervous people with guns was not a great combination.

Hill was aiming kind of in between Loki and Tony as though she wasn't sure which of them to shoot first. Campbell and another agent were aiming solidly at Loki. The other unknown agent was kind of aiming at Loki but also shooting conflicted looks at Fury, like maybe he wasn't entirely comfortable with what he was hearing.

Garcia was definitely aiming at Tony. Tony had a feeling Garcia was probably the one who'd called him a traitor. That was disappointing.

Pitching his voice low - Fury and Thor provided great cover - he murmured out of the corner of his mouth, "Feel like we've overstayed our welcome?"

"Mmm." Loki raised his voice slightly. "Thor, did you have any further questions? Urgent ones?"

Thor gave a cool, assessing look around the room, then said, "Nothing urgent, brother."

Tony felt that little stab of jealousy again at someone else sharing understandings with *his* Loki. He bit it back, although he did shift a little closer to Loki.

Fury said, "You assholes aren't walking anywhere--"

"Of course not," Loki said innocently.

Tony grinned as he felt Loki grasp his arm. "We're going to teleport."

Loki tugged them slantways through space, and Tony had just enough time to recognize his bedroom before he was being pulled down to straddle Loki's lap on the edge of the bed. Loki started to kiss him, then pulled back and grimaced. "Ugh. You've been *sick*."

"I'll go rinse my mouth," Tony said with a sigh. "...And brush my teeth. And..." He remembered that vague unpleasant whiff from earlier, and sniffed at himself before climbing up off Loki's lap. "Probably a shower as well."

"Ah... that's probably wise," Loki agreed. He stood up as well, rubbing absently at his abdomen.

Tony paused, reminded of the aching knot in his own stomach. "Your stomach hurt?"

"Hm, it's minor," Loki said dismissively - then gave him a second, warier look. "Why do you ask?"

"Mine, too." Tony smiled grimly. "Bit of a coincidence, don't you think?"

Loki looked like he was starting to contemplate mass murder again. "Do you suspect poison?"

"I wouldn't put it past them." But it wasn't the most efficient way to eliminate threats. And it had seemed like, at least while Tony was unconscious, SHIELD hadn't made up their minds whether to eliminate Tony or try to deprogram him - so when would they have administered poison?

In Loki's case it could be something they wanted to test his reaction to, but then why give it to Tony as well?

"Poison would be counterproductive," Tony said slowly. "Maybe a side effect from whatever they used to knock us out in the elevator."

Loki closed the small distance between them and pressed his hands to Tony's abdomen. "I'm not as familiar with Midgardian anatomy, but..." He frowned and moved one of the hands to his own stomach. "I cannot detect any illness or injury."

"Sir," Jarvis said, "historical 'notes' to yourself following initially unexplained stomach pains indicate that in eighty-three percent of cases, the symptom has subsequently been determined to be due to hunger. Might I enquire if you have eaten in the past twenty-four hours?"

When was the last time you ate, do you remember?

"...Oh," Tony said, feeling suddenly very stupid.

Loki cleared his throat and lifted his hands from their stomachs.

"So..." Tony suggested, "let's not tell anyone we did that."

"Agreed," Loki said quickly.

Tony rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly. "Jarvis, do I have a usual order with any, uh, places that deliver, something we can just get...?"

"Indeed, sir. You have a 'usual' with a number of local eateries including Veniero's Pasticceria, Taïm West Village, Bleecker Street Pizza--"

"That one, the last one you said. I want the usual and double - no - triple it." He looked up at Loki. "We should have time to wash up before it gets here, and then I guess figure out..."

"What comes next?" Loki finished for him.

Yeah. 'What comes next'. That was kind of mind-blowing all on its own.

#

Prodigal Sons (It's the Magic Martinis Talking)

Chapter Summary

Addressing the (some) issues.

Chapter Notes

I had an entire conversation between Rhodey and Tony about 'Edge of Tomorrow', then I went to double-check something and it turns out that movie wasn't released until 2014.

Moral of the story: don't research your fics, kids. Research ruins lives.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tony had more voicemail. He listened to half of one from Rhodey, which was mostly a rant about not knowing whether Tony was kidnapped or running a viral marketing campaign, then figured the rest were probably the same and deleted them all.

"I should explain things to Rhodey and Pepper," he mused, a fresh cup of coffee warming his hands. The beans were definitely stale. It was still coffee, though.

"You'd like to stay, then?" Loki asked, one arm draped along the back of the couch invitingly.

Tony could take a hint. He sat next to Loki and leaned back against that arm. "Even if I... go... wherever, I should still explain it to them," he said, staring absently out the window. At least the sky was clear again. "To be honest, Loki, I don't know. It's a lot to take in."

"It is," Loki agreed, a faint strain in his voice that was oddly comforting. To know that Loki wasn't immune to adjustment issues either.

It gave Tony enough confidence to quietly admit, "I think I'll cope better if I keep waking up in my own bedroom for a while."

Loki curled his outstretched arm a little closer around Tony's shoulders, stealth-hugging him. "I, on the other hand," he said lightly, "have had more than enough of waking up disguised as my father."

Tony chuckled. He drank some more coffee and leaned comfortably against Loki. It felt good to be clean - he hadn't realized how filthy he must have gotten until they'd actually washed. The amount his stubble had grown had been a particular surprise. That was something he was going to have to keep an eye on, remembering to take care of those regular grooming tasks. And eating enough. There was a lot to keep track of.

"Jarvis, send a message to Rhodey," he added while he remembered. "Tell him 'none of the above' and to drop by when he has a chance. With Pepper. *Without* an assault squad."

"Yes, sir."

"I suppose I must make some kind of peace with SHIELD, then," Loki said resentfully.

Tony grimaced, hackles rising a little at that idea. "Actually I'm thinking along different lines." He shifted to look at Loki directly. "They're not good. I may not know exactly where the moral line is, but I know they crossed it a long, long time ago. Someone needs to take them down."

"By 'someone', I take it you mean us," Loki said, mouth curving with dark satisfaction.

"Thought you might like that," Tony said, lifting his coffee mug for another drink.

"Hm." Loki smirked a little. "Persuade Thor that such an act is not an attack on Midgard, and you have a deal."

Hang on. Tony tilted his head in disbelief. "You're trying to bargain over doing what you want to do anyway?"

"Well, yes," Loki said, and flashed Tony a self-satisfied grin.

...Well, yeah. That was pretty typical Loki behavior. Tony rolled his eyes fondly. "Okay, so, I guess the question is how to go about it. Blowing them up would be satisfying but only temporary--hang on, it wouldn't be temporary, would it." He paused to work through the implications in his mind. "I... guess that means we shouldn't leave evidence that proves it was us?"

"Not that I oppose this plan," Loki said with a slight smirk, "but perhaps we should establish whether you wish to destroy the people or the institution. Or both, that would certainly be my preference."

'Both' had a pretty strong appeal right now. Tony made a contemplative, predatory noise, eyes narrowing slightly as he considered the possibilities.

Loki gave a soft, dangerous laugh, and leaned in to nuzzle behind Tony's ear, high up his neck. "I do like it when you're bloodthirsty," he murmured.

"I'm aware," Tony said with a smirk, recalling numerous heated battlefield looks. He turned his head to capture Loki's mouth in a languid kiss, then drained the rest of his coffee.

He started to put the cup down on the floor before his eyes were caught by the one already sitting there. He picked that one up as well and stared at them for a moment. Two dirty coffee cups. Friday. Saturday.

"Allow me," Loki said, reaching for the cups.

Tony pulled them away without thinking about it. "No, I-- I just... Not right now." He leaned forward and put them on the coffee table, adjusting them so their handles faced the same direction. There were a few scattered pizza crumbs still there. "Just leave them for a bit, okay?"

"...Alright," Loki said, eyeing him.

"I'm fine," Tony said, uncomfortable under the scrutiny. "You can take that look off your face."

For a moment it seemed like Loki was going to say something, then he glanced away. That was almost worse. It meant Tony didn't have the opportunity to defend himself against... whatever it was. He frowned in irritation, muscles tensing a little.

"I'm fine," he insisted.

"You are much better than *fine*," Loki said slyly, tugging him back in close. "Come here and whisper in my ear of all the ways we could destroy your enemies."

Tony laughed, allowing himself to be distracted. He swung over to straddle Loki's lap and put his mouth to Loki's ear. Then, with an impish grin he knew Loki couldn't see, he stuck his tongue in the outside bit of the ear canal. Loki *shrieked* and jerked his head away.

Tony snickered helplessly, leaning on the back of the couch behind Loki's shoulder. Loki gave him a dirty look.

"You are *not* to do that to your enemies."

"Oh, really," Tony said playfully. "Will I be in trouble?"

"Immensely," Loki emphasized, sliding his hands up Tony's thighs to grasp his hips. "Although I fear that will only encourage you."

"Mm, you know me so well." Tony snuck a couple of quick kisses, then sat back and frowned at a spot in the air. "It's a pity I didn't spend more time screwing with the government. Wouldn't have had to be many versions, just often enough so I could remember things like who I had dirt on and who owed me favors. You know, basic civics."

"Ah," Loki said, with a tone of real regret that suggested he understood how big a resource they were probably missing. "That is a shame."

Without much hope, Tony lifted his head slightly to address the nearest microphone. "Jarvis, I don't suppose I have a really convenient database of blackmail material, do I?"

"Not as such, sir," Jarvis replied, "but there are a number of recorded notes that may be relevant. Would you like me to compile?"

"Yes, do that. Anyone I can influence. Prioritize domestic politics and military." Tony draped his arms around Loki's shoulders and grimaced slightly. "We can't just do it over and over until we find the most dramatically satisfying way to take them down, can we..."

"No," Loki agreed, "but nor do we have to rush to complete the task before an arbitrary reset point."

Ooh, true. Tony acknowledged that with a tip of his head.

"And," Loki added, "those opportunities you don't recall will serve to confuse the soldiers of SHIELD, for you will not act as they expect you to."

Also true. Tony grinned. "Trust you to find the potential chaos and confusion in any situation."

"In this case, it hardly takes much finding," Loki said smugly. "Chaos follows in your very footsteps, my *kläs*. It's quite endearing."

"Just one of many endearing qualities I possess." Tony slid off Loki's lap and sat back next to him on the couch. "Killing everyone isn't going to be enough to solve it. I don't remember all the details in the files but I remember there were things *in the files* - which means that if anyone else comes along that data is still there to be recovered. I remember enough to know there are multiple projects that I want wiped off the face of the planet."

"I have some small idea, from what you mentioned earlier," Loki said grimly.

"Yeah." Tony glanced out the window, absently noting the sky was still blue and clear. "It's like they dedicated themselves to being awful. You get a project that's kind of... ends justify the means... then under more secure encryption is that step over the edge, your lethal targeting algorithm or forced experimentation or whatever... and that's bad enough but then you get even *more* levels of encryption and something even worse... bigger algorithm, more invasive experiments... it's turtles all the way down, except the turtles are crimes against humanity."

"So there are those who took part or have knowledge of these projects... there are records and details which must be found and destroyed... as well as whatever physical elements each project comprises," Loki summarized. "Well, that shouldn't be difficult."

Tony cast him a suspicious look, but Loki seemed perfectly sincere. "Don't forget arranging it so that nobody tries to do anything annoying like assassinate us or send us to some offshore detention center with inadequate air conditioning."

Loki smirked a little. "Child's play."

"I'm a little concerned about what Asgard considers appropriate childhood play," Tony said drily. "Well, we probably needed a new goal."

Loki glanced down at his hands, pretending to examine his fingernails. A little ruefully, he said, "I confess I have found myself thinking more than once that we should make haste to alter the Bifrost."

"Yeah," Tony exhaled, slumping against Loki's side. "That whole... that."

They sat together in silence for a while; Tony was mostly taking the time to consider options for dealing with SHIELD. He had a feeling they were likely to put up a fight. It would be fun, at least; kind of a pity he wouldn't be able to practice it over and over because there were bound to be opportunities for some fantastic lines. Still, he had faith in Loki's natural flair for drama.

A moment after it happened, Tony registered the splash of red that had flown past his window. He craned his head pointlessly. "Was that...?"

"Yes," Loki said. "I was starting to wonder what was taking him so long."

Across the room - behind them and to the right - came the sound of the outside door opening. Presumably Thor had landed on the armor disassembly walkway. Thor's voice sounded, clear and with a hint of relief: "I thought I might find you here."

Tony stood up automatically, assuming that Loki would do the same - instead Loki stayed seated and looked in Thor's direction with a sardonic expression.

"You *hoped* you might find me here," Loki corrected. "Be honest, Thor. You thought you would find that I had long since fled."

Thor bristled. "And is that so unreasonable? Given your methods of escaping consequences lately--"

"Turn around, Thor," Loki growled out, rising to his feet in a single fluid motion. "I will give you one opportunity to come back in and start anew, but my patience is limited."

"*Your* patience?" Thor demanded incredulously. "You escaped your imprisonment, let me believe you were dead - again - so that you could seize the throne and carry out who knows what wickedness--"

Loki's hand twitched in a motion Tony recognized as an aborted knife summoning. "*Turn. Around.*"

There was no way Tony was going to miss out on some frustration venting, if that was the way the conversation was going. He let his eyes fall half-closed as he concentrated, building the structure of a gauntlet around his right hand. He hadn't got the hang of creating an arc reactor yet, something about the molecular structure of the isotope it used was weirdly volatile, but even a second-rate power source would be enough to make a point or two.

Thor was getting defensive and indignant, and Loki seemed to be getting closer and closer to just stabbing him, so Tony ambled around the end of the couch to get in a better position. When he was lined up, he swung his hand up and blasted Thor right back out the door with a shattering of reinforced glass.

Loki looked at Tony with a startled jolt, then admitted ruefully, "I suppose I should have expected that."

"You think?" Tony flashed him a quick smirk.

Thor had got to his feet, and the fact that the hammer was now in his hand didn't bode well. Tony held up a hand - his left hand, bare - as Thor approached the empty doorframe.

"Seriously, Quick Draw - you should think about how you want this conversation to go before you walk back in. Trust me, if Loki says you get one do-over, then that's all you're getting."

Thor scowled, and his grip on the hammer flexed, but he stopped before the door and looked at Loki. "So you will make peace if only I speak nothing of your crimes?"

Tony's hackles rose. "What did I just tell you--"

Thor gestured at the doorframe with a hard smirk. "I have not re-entered, yet."

Loki snorted, walking closer. Tony rolled his eyes. Okay, so he could see the signs that they'd grown up together. Still, he didn't like Thor's attitude.

"You are welcome to speak of my crimes, Thor," Loki said, reaching Tony's side. "What I will no longer stand for is being blamed for crimes which are not my own. I recommend you take Tony's advice and consider your words and your assumptions carefully."

Thor narrowed his eyes at Loki. After a couple of seconds, he gave a short, terse nod. "I will attempt to do so, if you will attempt not to always assume the worst of what I may believe."

Loki paused, then nodded in return. "We have a deal, then."

Thor hung the hammer back on his belt, then stepped deliberately inside, glass crunching under his boots. "Loki, Tony Stark, I greet you. I have had words with the Director of SHIELD and he has agreed to take no immediate action, to allow us some time to reach an understanding."

Tony snorted. Loki said wryly, "He's very likely lying, you realize."

"Indeed," Thor said grimly. "The warriors of SHIELD are not... as I initially took them to be. But it seems very little is, these days."

With the atmosphere less hostile, Tony flexed his fingers and disassembled the gauntlet - turned it back into air and energy. He really needed to get the hang of making folds in space like Loki did.

Practice that later. For now, he crossed to the bar and pulled out some glasses to pour drinks for the three of them.

Behind him, Loki said, "The fact that you at least recognize that is a promising start."

"Well, you've come to recognize the charm that Midgardians may wield, so I suppose that makes us even." Thor's tone of voice was distinctly teasing.

"Oh, here we go," Loki muttered.

"Now, what was it that you said... ah, yes. A hundred years is but a heartbeat..."

"I assure you," Loki retorted, "having been cast outside time's gyre with him, 'ephemeral' is the last word I would choose to describe Tony Stark."

"Marshmallow, I'm touched," Tony said brightly, pressing a glass of whiskey into Loki's hands. "Listen, why don't you do your..." he circled a hand vaguely in the air, "brotherly catch-up slash peace negotiations, whatever it is, and I'll go down to the workshop and do some research. Skim my sent emails, that kind of thing. Give you two some space."

He knew Loki had spent some versions of the fourteenth talking to Thor - if there were particular phrases or speeches that worked particularly well, they'd be in the context of a private conversation. Having a third party hanging around might affect how Thor reacted, and it wasn't like Tony didn't have plenty of research to do. He had basically an entire life to revise.

Loki paused, possibly thinking through some of the same details, then nodded. "Very well. But if we are not yet done when it comes time for the evening meal, do not hesitate to join us."

Thereby ensuring they remembered to eat dinner. Tony smirked appreciatively and touched the rim of his glass to Loki's. "Done."

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Most of the emails he'd sent in the month before the time-loop fell into two basic categories: R&D for Stark Industries, and Rhodey. Apparently after Thor had arrived to debrief them on the events around Loki's 'death', Tony had spent a lot of time emailing Rhodey about how weird it was to have all the Avengers in his building.

'Remember when you said you'd rather drive a Lexus than be a part of Fury's 'boy band'?''

'There was a mysterious blue energy cube; I'm only human.'

'Face it, T, you're basically one step away from becoming a SHIELD agent.'

Tony grimaced in distaste. The idea of being on good terms with SHIELD - surely he hadn't been that naive. Had he?

A lot of the emails were annoyingly devoid of context, including one to Pepper that was just a picture of a lop-eared rabbit eating raspberries and the text *'How about this one?'*

There were a couple to a lawyer about finer points of dealing with 'FAA' - oh, Federal Aviation Administration, okay - and an off-handed joke about Wikipedia that made Tony realize *just how many* sources of information he could call on. Wikipedia, of course. A proper *summary*, this was exactly what he needed. It was enough to fill in some background context and-- wait, he and Rhodey had rescued the President? Well, *that* was bound to be useful.

Tony engrossed himself in his Wikipedia page, following links to source material and re-familiarizing himself with descriptions of events that gave him the weirdest feeling of déjà vu. He didn't know how much time had passed when Jarvis spoke up.

"Sir, you have an incoming call from Colonel Rhodes on your priority line."

Tony sat back in his chair, reminding himself that he had to do this right the first time. A shiver of tension ran through him. "Put it through. Rhodey, you there?"

A pause, and Rhodey's voice. "Tony. I've been trying to reach you, man."

Tony blinked, almost immediately thrown off track. That wasn't what Rhodey said, that wasn't ever what Rhodey said when Tony called. There were a whole lot of conversations Tony had repeated and that line wasn't in any of them.

He closed his eyes for a moment and tried to calm his heart rate. "Yeah, what's up?"

"What's *up*?" Rhodey repeated incredulously. "You're seriously gonna play that game - look, can you put me on video?"

"One moment, caller," Tony quipped. He slipped on an earpiece and reached across the workstation to a tablet that was resting on the corner. Paused to take a slow breath in and then let it out. New conversations, new lines, new starts.

It didn't take long to reroute the call, and then he was looking at Rhodey's face in the screen of the tablet. The background didn't ring any bells; generic wall, window, open blinds. Rhodey's eyes were moving and it didn't take a genius to realize it was the same visual assessment.

Tony held the tablet up and turned it slowly to survey the room before bringing it back down in front of himself. "See? Workshop. Safe and sound."

"Are you alone?" Rhodey asked seriously.

"I just showed you the whole room." Tony paused, then added, "There's company upstairs, if that counts."

"Company," repeated Rhodey, eyes intent.

Tony cocked his head, trying to think through what he'd read in the emails. He wasn't sure what Rhodey did or didn't know. (Also he really should have followed up with a phone sex joke when Rhodey had asked if he was alone, it was the perfect comeback. Next time-- no. Dammit.) "...Have you met Thor?"

"Thor's there?" The tension in Rhodey's frame eased a little. "What the hell is happening, Tones? You vanish into thin air for two weeks, there's no ransom demands, people are saying it might be a revenge attack, then the next thing anybody knows you're going viral having some dance in a music store? There's unconfirmed reports of a hotel room in your name getting raided by SWAT? You scared the hell out of us, man."

"Not SWAT, it was SHIELD," Tony corrected absently. The look on Rhodey's face suggested that wasn't any improvement. "This is why I said you should come over, it's... kind of complicated and you're going to want a drink."

He had said Rhodey should come over, right? Or had that been in a previous-- in one of the versions of the fourteenth? No, he'd sent the message in response to Rhodey's voicemail about his

disappearance, it had to be part of the timeline.

Rhodey was giving him an exasperated look - tinged with lingering worry. It was a few seconds before Rhodey actually answered. "Fine. But you better not have disappeared again when I get there, 'cause you know I'll hunt you down just to kick your ass."

--

"You seem taller," Tony blurted, when Rhodey and Pepper walked in. "Are you taller than you used to be?"

He only really remembered seeing Rhodey on screens, a person from the shoulders up and a mystery below. In person, Rhodey had a torso and legs and everything. Long legs. Pepper was wearing different clothes, Rhodey was tall, and they were both here in his workshop where they never came.

"No, Tony," Rhodey said patiently - and that was something Tony remembered, the way Rhodey shut down his diversions by addressing them head on; more people should really try that tactic. "I'm not taller. This better be one hell of an explanation."

"Yeah." Tony grimaced, thinking about the distance to the bar. Ah, what the hell. He pulled on that magical hyper-focus and carefully recoded the air above the workstation. "Let's jump right in with the parts you're not going to believe - anyone for a drink?"

"What the fuck," Rhodey said, staring at the glasses of whiskey that had just appeared. "Did you just-- oh my *God*, Tony, did you crack teleportation?"

"I'm still working on that one," Tony admitted truthfully, although he knew Rhodey meant via tech. "Folding space is hard, okay? I can tell when someone else is doing it, I just need more practice. No, this? This is matter transformation at the atomic level."

Rhodey blinked, then breathed, "No way. Conservation of mass--"

"Conservation of mass and energy in a closed system," Tony nodded. "It still holds. We just had the boundaries of the system wrong."

Eyes wide, Pepper reached out and picked up one of the glasses. She turned it in her hand for a moment, then abruptly tossed the whiskey back in one go. After a full body shudder and several blinks, she put the empty glass back and said, "Well, it's definitely alcohol."

Tony grinned. With a moment's thought, he refilled the glass.

"How are you doing that?" Rhodey demanded, peering around - and under - the workstation. "Where are the controls? Is it-- no, wait, Jarvis is picking up finger signals, right?"

"Not a bad guess," Tony said thoughtfully. "But, no. Trick question - there are no controls."

"What do you mean, no controls," Pepper said, with that stressed edge in her voice that she got when she was trying to figure something out. "You must be controlling it from some-- Is this Jarvis? Did you give Jarvis the ability to *generate alcohol*?"

This whole conversation was both bafflingly - and excitingly - new, and reassuringly familiar. Tony hadn't really realized it, but he must have been half-afraid or half-expecting that he wouldn't... *fit* with other people. SHIELD hadn't helped that.

Pepper and Rhodey were meant to be his friends, except... he was so used to pre-scripted conversations and the same predictable sets of responses. He hadn't been sure how he'd react to them, now, *after* the fourteenth. It turned out that the words could change, conversations could be new. At the same time, their basic attitudes were familiar.

Tony knew these people. He liked these people.

"This is another thing you're going to have trouble believing," he told them. With a smirk, he tapped the side of his head. "It's all me. I can do magic."

"Very funny," Rhodey said suspiciously.

Pepper muttered, "You couldn't have made martinis?"

It was probably meant to be under her breath, but Tony shrugged and turned her glass into a martini. Because he *could*. No wonder Loki liked showing this stuff off so much.

"...You were right," Rhodey said after a moment, picking up one of the other whiskeys. "I do want a drink."

Pepper picked up her martini and fixed Tony with a determined look. "Explain," she said firmly. "From the beginning."

Tony picked up the last drink and took a sip. It was okay as whiskeys went, but not the best he'd tasted - obviously he hadn't got the mix of impurities quite right. "From the beginning. Okay. Well. There's a third unbelievable thing."

"With you, Tony, nothing is unbelievable," Pepper sighed.

Tony *had* considered easing into it, but a statement like that was just beginning to be challenged. He grinned darkly. "Time got damaged. I was trapped in the same day with one other person, looping over and over, so we invented time travel to escape into the future."

"Come on, Tony," Rhodey chided him impatiently. "We were worried about you. Cut the bull and just tell us where you've been."

Tony leaned back in his chair and raised his eyebrows. He sipped at his whiskey, not speaking.

"Be serious, man," Rhodey said, sounding more annoyed.

"Tony," Pepper said more quietly, "who was that man who was with you yesterday? He wasn't a SHIELD agent."

Tony looked at her, feeling a little bad about the open concern on her face. He offered a little more clarification. "No. He was the one who was trapped in the same day with me. He's the one who taught me magic."

In his head he could clearly hear Fury's voice, *'I think you're forgetting he's still a wanted war criminal.'*

Pepper and Rhodey had come out of the elevator. They... probably hadn't been upstairs first, they'd have come directly to the workshop because they would have asked Jarvis and Jarvis would have confirmed he was still here.

Tony bit his lip as he realized he was going to have to make this conversation go really, really well

if he wanted a chance to keep Pep and Rhodey as his friends. And he was only going to get one attempt. No practices, no resets, no do-overs.

He took a longer drink.

"You're serious," Rhodey realized. "...You're *serious*? No way, Tony, no way. Matter transformation, magic, *time travel*? You do realize this sounds insane."

Tony hunched his shoulders slightly, unable to help getting a little defensive. "Yeah, well, days that just keep going forward constantly changing sounds pretty insane too, but you don't see me criticizing the structure of time *you* live in."

Judging by Rhodey's expression, that sentence didn't make much sense out loud.

Tony put his whiskey down with a sigh, and scrubbed both hands over his face. "Okay, look. I'm going to start over, and I'm going to tell you the whole story, but you have to promise to hear me out. Alright? There's parts you're not going to like, but you need to listen to the whole thing before you make up your minds."

"Okay, Tony," blurred with "Sure thing," and they were both easy, unthinking agreement.

Tony shook his head. "Promise me," he insisted. "Promise you'll listen to all of it."

Pepper and Rhodey exchanged glances, but they made the promise, and Tony exhaled softly. His hands were damp and he rubbed them against his pants. Behind Pepper and Rhodey he constructed a chair for each of them, just copies of his own to keep it straightforward. "You may as well get comfortable..."

--

They took the news about Loki relatively well. At least, neither of them accused him of being mind-controlled... although Rhodey did suggest that it was kind of like Stockholm Syndrome. And, well, Loki hadn't kidnapped him, but it wasn't like Tony couldn't see the parallels - he'd effectively been trapped with an enemy and slowly grown to sympathize with him.

The thing was... so what? He'd grown to sympathize with Loki, like Loki, *love* Loki - putting some pathologizing label on it didn't make the feelings any less real.

Hopefully taking the time to explain properly paid off. It was hard when Tony didn't remember everything particularly clearly, but he could honestly assure them that he and Loki had *not* started off well, that it had taken a lot of different versions of the day played out before they even started to like each other.

He just... really hoped his explanation would be enough.

Rhodey and Pepper were clearly trying to keep their interruptions to a minimum (although Rhodey's baffled, "But you're not gay," had been an inadvertent moment of levity; Tony pointed out that by this stage, he'd tried out pretty much *everything*).

It seemed to be going kind of okay, as far as Tony could tell - but he wasn't sure how much of that was wishful thinking.

The biggest stumbling block turned out to be SHIELD.

"I can't hear this," Rhodey said, when Tony made a comment about them needing to be brought in

line.

"You promised--" Tony reminded him, again.

"No, Tony, it's..." Rhodey shook his head, a serious frown on his face. "God, it's bad enough you cozying up to a war criminal - I know, I know, circumstances - but you're talking about a government agency. If anyone asks me-- don't you get it, *I can't hear this.*"

"That war criminal isn't the one who fired a nuclear missile at New York City," Pepper retorted, unexpectedly fiercely.

Tony glanced at her in surprise. Admittedly, she was on Martini Numero... Tres? But the underlying sentiment had to be hers.

Rhodey insisted, "We have a chain of command and a structure for a reason. I've got a duty, I can't just pick it up and put it down--"

"Okay," Tony said, reaching forward to tug Rhodey's glass away from him. "Let's call time out, huh? I have it on relatively good authority that food is important. Let's order some dinner and um--"

If Rhodey didn't want to hear any plots against SHIELD, he probably didn't want to see the aforementioned war criminal in Tony's penthouse, either. Tony grimaced.

Fortunately, Rhodey shook his head. "No offence, Tony, but... all this is a hell of a lot to take in, you know? I really need to... Look, I'm gonna catch a cab, I'll sleep on it, try to wrap my head around it."

Tony paused, rocking back in his chair for a moment. "Right," he said hesitantly. It should be a relief, but it made him uneasy. What if Rhodey didn't like what he wrapped his head around? (Worse, what if Rhodey woke up and didn't *remember*?)

He forced himself to glance at Pepper. "What about you, you gonna split a cab?"

Pepper shook her head. A couple of wisps of her hair had come loose. "I want to ask a couple of things," she said, then her tone softened a little. "And I should really eat something."

They saw Rhodey off, and Tony called in an order for food. Then he hesitated, looking at Pepper. "Uh, before we go up, there's something I should..."

"Loki's here," Pepper said matter-of-factly.

Tony winced a little. "You're supposed to be too drunk to figure that out."

"One," she held up a finger and everything, "you ordered enough food for six people. Two," two fingers, "I was your P.A. long enough to know the look on your face when you have somebody inappropriate stashed in your bedroom, Tony."

Okay, well, that was a fair point. Technically Loki was more likely to be in the lounge than the bedroom, but yeah. Tony rubbed the back of his neck. "You're not running for the hills," he observed hopefully.

Pepper paused to think. Finally she said, "Maybe it's the magic martinis talking, but... I've seen enough people turn on you. If, just for once, someone switched to *your* side... maybe it's worth thinking twice before throwing away an ally."

Tony was genuinely shocked. "I am genuinely shocked," he said out loud. "Miss Potts, are you *encouraging* me to cavort with criminals?"

Pepper gave a short, harsh laugh. "After Obadiah, after Killian... I..." She put her hand over her mouth for a moment and Tony noted with alarm her eyes starting to well up. "I just want you to be *safe*!" she wailed, tears starting to flow.

"Uh oh," Tony muttered, more to himself than to her. Too many martinis. But he stepped closer to her and wrapped her up in a hug. "Hey. Hey. I'm okay. I am safe, see? I'm right here."

Pepper clung to him, sniffing as the words tumbled out of her. "I had to watch you fly that nuke-- And then I thought the Mandarin had killed you, and then, then-- You're my *best friend*, Tony, and you just *vanished*, and I didn't know w-where, I'd just lie awake imagining all the terrible things someone could be doing to you and I just..."

She dissolved into sobs; deep, hitching, helpless noises that struck at Tony's heart. He kept murmuring, trying to reassure her. Just holding on to her.

Finally her crying eased; she pulled back, wiping at her eyes and sniffing.

"We've got to get you a better class of friend," Tony joked weakly.

Pepper shot him an absolutely furious, if somewhat watery, glare. "Don't you *dare* start that right now. You are the absolute *best*--" Her voice cracked and she swallowed, wiping her eyes again.

Tony held up his hands in surrender. "Alright, I'm the best. You'll get no argument from me."

"That'd be a first," Pepper muttered.

"I choose not to dignify that with a response," Tony said loftily. He glanced back at the workshop and noted the discarded empty glasses; turned them back to air with a thought. It was getting smoother the more he practiced. "You ready to face company?"

Pepper sniffed one more time; gave a firm, careful wipe under each eye and checked her index fingers for mascara smudges. "Yep," she said steadily, moving towards the stairs up to the lounge. "I've always wanted to give the shovel talk to a member of royalty."

"Really?" Tony said doubtfully as he followed behind. That seemed... *did* that seem like a weird thing for Pepper to want? He didn't know. Well, it seemed like she was sticking around, he'd catch back up.

"No, Tony," Pepper said in an astoundingly dry tone. "Honestly, the idea of you having a one night stand with some foreign princess would probably have given me a nervous breakdown."

Tony didn't really see how a full-blown relationship with a fully alien, fully male *prince* - who had previously attacked New York - was somehow less stress-inducing, but if Pepper wasn't going to freak out about it then, hey. Who was he to argue with results, right?

They came out into the lounge where Thor and Loki were both sitting on the curved couch, heads close together in conversation. Tony noted absently that Thor's cape was just a shade too scarlet; the couch was a slightly bluer red and the colors clashed.

"Food's on the way," he announced, both as greeting and as explanation for appearing in the lounge. Both Asgardians raised their heads, looking like they'd gotten a bit teary-eyed themselves.

Loki rose and walked over to meet Tony, although his eyes flickered curiously in Pepper's direction. With a small sigh of relief, he admitted, "A meal will do us good."

"Big talk, huh?" In the corner of his eye, Tony could see Thor getting up as well. He glanced at Pepper ruefully. "Yeah, us too."

Loki paused, uncharacteristically hesitant. "And, ah...?"

Tony wasn't sure what Loki was actually asking so he erred on the side of giving the most relevant information. "I told Pepper basically the whole story, what I remember of it anyway. And Rhodey, but he's gone to think it over, I think it hasn't really sunk in yet."

"We haven't been properly introduced, 'Agent Walker'," Pepper said, lifting her chin a little as she met Loki's eyes. "I'm Virginia Potts. Tony's a good friend of mine."

"Really?" Tony murmured to her. "You're making him call you Virginia? What happened to 'don't throw away an ally'?"

"He *did* still attack Earth," Pepper retorted, not taking her eyes off Loki.

"And I am Loki Odinson," Loki said, with a formal bow of his head, "...which I think you already know. I would tell you that I deeply regret my prior actions against this world, but words will not erase my deeds. I can only hope, Lady Virginia, that you might grant me the opportunity to prove myself by my actions going forward."

"Not bad," Pepper said thoughtfully. "If we have to put him in front of the press we're probably already screwed, but it might not be a *complete* catastrophe."

"Ah, you're a strategist." Loki started smiling his shark smile. "How much has Tony told you of SHIELD?"

"Enough," Pepper said, her voice like steel. "I'm in."

Tony twisted his head to stare at her, shocked all over again. "What do you mean, 'in'? You..."

"You think because SHIELD helped us I owe them something?" Pepper asked him, challenging. "Because I liked Phil, I can't change my mind about them? I *told* you, Tony - I trusted Obadiah too. I thought Killian was... mostly harmless. I'm not going to make that mistake again."

According to Wikipedia, Killian Aldrich had been a terrorist messing with bio-weapons, the one Tony and Rhodey had saved the President from. Obadiah Stane... Obie, Tony actually remembered somewhat. He'd had the feeling Wikipedia was glossing over some details and Pepper's references - twice now - only confirmed his suspicions.

He wasn't going to ask about that now, of course; he was pretty sure it was unpleasant and it wasn't urgent. Instead he said, somewhat petulantly, "Why is everyone assuming I'm going to war with SHIELD?"

Loki gave him an incredulous look. Pepper gave a scathing little huff, and pushed further into the room to go greet Thor.

Okay, admittedly Tony *was* going to war with SHIELD, but he hadn't told Rhodey and Pepper that. Not in so many words, at least.

They topped up their drinks - except for Pepper, who decided it was time to switch to water - and

Tony started laying out the basics of what they'd need to consider in taking SHIELD down. Pepper filled in pieces he'd forgotten. When the food arrived, they paused long enough to share it out, then kept talking while they ate. Thor was the most hesitant of them, not entirely on board with striking against people who were trying to protect their realm. Until:

"I know because I *was them*, Thor," Loki said, baring his teeth in something too pained to really be a smile. "They may have begun with the best of *intentions*, but as they failed in achieving their goals, as control slipped from their grasp - they have become twisted and cruel."

"Loki," Thor said softly.

Loki shook his head. "Take it from me, brother... they are beyond the point where they can be reasoned with. They will hear naught but threats in any words we offer them. As surely as I needed to be stopped when I came to Midgard in anger, they too must be stopped, or they will bring the same war down on those we care for."

Thor looked grieved but nodded quietly. Tony gently bumped his arm against Loki's, a silent gesture of support. Pepper was studying Loki intently, looking thoughtful again. Apparently his words had made an impact.

They plotted, and ate, and topped up the drinks again, and talked into the night. Tony didn't manage to get the whiskey to taste how he wanted it to, although after a couple of glasses Loki just summoned a bottle for him and suggested that maybe messing around with the construction of atoms while drunk wasn't the greatest idea.

Eventually Pepper and Thor excused themselves to guest rooms, and Tony got to tug Loki to *his* bed, in *his* home, with time going forward and every reason to believe they would wake up together in the same bed in the morning. It was weirdly appealing.

"I'm really glad it was you," Tony mumbled as he snuggled in, tucking his head against Loki's shoulder.

--

"Good morning, sir. It's seven a.m., Sunday December first. The weather in New York City is thirty-seven degrees and partially cloudy, with an expected high of forty-nine."

Tony stirred, and then he instantly regretted moving because *oh god he was dying*.

His head pounded and his eyes felt like they were filled with grit. His tongue was glued to the roof of his mouth, his skin was too hot, and his stomach felt concerningly unstable.

Had they been attacked, were they picking a fight in some country with enough force to overpower-- but Jarvis had said good morning, that was *Jarvis'* voice-- December first, what the hell kind of joke was that supposed to be; not Thursday, not the fourteenth, not even *November?!!*

Tony's head felt like murder and he gave a plaintive whimper, squeezing his eyes tightly closed. He wanted to throw up and he wanted to cry and there was the rustling of sheets and the mattress dipped and *someone else was in the bed--*

A hand touched his arm and Tony jerked away, letting out a noise of pain immediately afterwards.

"It's alright, it's me," came Loki's voice, low and soothing. "Seven a.m., Thursday fourteenth. The weather in New York City is thirty-five degrees and clear. Alright?"

With an expected high of fifty-four. Tony took a ragged breath. Everything hurt so much. "Poison," he whispered.

There was a brief silence, then a noise Tony couldn't immediately place. After a moment he realized Loki was *laughing*.

"Loki," he rasped, shoving an arm out to poke blindly in Loki's direction. This wasn't hunger, this was something much, much worse. "*Help*."

SHIELD, whether it was something slow-acting, or... maybe they'd had the place under surveillance, got to the food before it was delivered... that meant Pepper might be in danger, although apparently it wasn't something that affected Asgardians.

God, what if it wasn't poison, what if it was a bioweapon?

"Indeed, I believe an excess of drink can be toxic to your kind," Loki murmured, resting a hand on Tony's forehead. "Oh, dear."

"What," Tony croaked blearily. SHIELD had poisoned the drinks? How--

"You're hung-over," Loki informed him, with what was quite frankly an indecent level of amusement.

Tony groaned, realizing that he would in fact probably decimate small countries to get hold of a bottle of water right now. Was this really what a hangover felt like? "Shit..."

At least he hurt too much to properly panic.

Come to think of it, he might have preferred the panic.

Loki leaned over and pressed a kiss to his forehead. "Rest, you fool. I'll bring something to quench your thirst - and perhaps ease your pain, though I do not promise to be so generous a second time."

Tony heard 'ease' and 'pain' and wasn't above making a little whimpering noise to sound as pathetic as possible. From the sounds of the snort that followed, Loki wasn't taken in, but as long as he could stop this feeling of *absolute death* then Tony was fine with that.

--

Later, when Tony felt less like he was going to somehow throw up the contents of his own skull, he made pancakes. Well, before that he went online to look up how to make pancakes, and before *that* he showered and put on clean clothes. He wasn't sure what to do with the clothes from... yesterday. He wasn't used to waking up and having clothes on the floor. Did that mean there was something he should have done with them before he went to bed?

The point was: pancakes.

"This is weird," he muttered to himself, watching little bubbles rise to the surface of the frying mixture. "This is so weird."

"That... liquid dough?" Loki asked, leaning against the far wall to give Tony room while cooking. "You're the one who chose to make it."

"No, this whole..." Tony gestured vaguely with his spatula. "You, here, before ten oh three. *Breakfast*. Everything."

Loki grimaced a little. "You could pretend it's later in the morning, if that helps."

"I feel like I've forgotten something," Tony admitted. "Something I was meant to do, or something that should have... It's just this *feeling* that something's not quite right."

Carefully, he worked the spatula under the pancake and smoothly flipped it over. With his eyes on the fry-pan, he asked quietly, "How long do you think I'll... take? To get over it?"

For a moment, there was just the sound of the pancake sizzling. Then Loki said in the same quiet tone, "I don't know, *tjokläs*. I'm sorry."

Tony stared down at the pancake, then he squared his shoulders. "Well," he announced, with a confidence he didn't entirely feel, "good thing we're adaptable."

--

After his first coffee for the day, he put the cup next to the other two on the coffee table in the lounge, all lined up neatly.

Friday. Saturday. Sunday.

Still there. Proof.

--

Thor joined them in the lounge later in the morning, to check on them before nipping off to visit Jane. Presumably that meant he and Loki had reached some kind of understanding the previous vers-- day. The Saturday.

"Send Jane my greetings," Loki said, smiling wickedly.

"Maybe tell her Loki's alive, first," Tony said drily. "Then the greetings."

Loki's smile broadened. "And *definitely* add Tony's greetings. I'm sure she'll be delighted to receive his well wishes."

Sinister. Dust. Something... something... Ambulance? Ambience? No, that wasn't right.

Tony shook his head distractedly. He'd been looking at helicarrier schematics on the workstation in the lounge - he didn't even need to hack SHIELD to get them; they were in his own SI project files, with notes on arc reactor engine installation. The contract was for three carriers but as far as Tony could tell from the files, the engines were only partially fitted.

Thor was saying something about not needing Loki's advice on what to say to a maiden, and Loki muttered "That's new," half under his breath but deliberately loud enough to be heard.

"When their Black Widow spoke to me she didn't seem exactly charmed by you," Thor retorted.

Loki widened his eyes and exclaimed, "Why, Agent Romanoff adores me! Midgardians like to feel like their jobs have *meaning*, brother. What better meaning than a villain to oppose? "

"Agent Romanoff is not a maiden, she's a SHIELD agent," Tony said, eyeing them both in case their crazy was catching. "I'm pretty sure she only adores... actually, no, can't think of anything."

"Be that as it may," Thor said, with a sort of chiding frown in Tony's direction, "she was concerned enough for your safety to seek me out."

Loki didn't seem to move, but his posture suddenly took on an air of readiness. Serious now, he asked, "What do you mean?"

"I mean, after I left your company last night she contacted me on the device that Fury gave me, and asked to meet." Thor raised a challenging eyebrow. "She wanted my opinion, as one of Asgard, on whether you had meddled with Stark's mind."

"Fury gave you a phone," Tony repeated. "You realize there's a surveillance chip in it."

"No, there isn't," Loki said, rolling his eyes. That made sense. Of course Loki had taken care of it as soon as Thor arrived. Tony gave him a thumbs up.

To the room at large, he said, "What's it going to take for Fury to believe me? Why does he even *care*? I kind of got the impression he was going to just assassinate me. I mean, *try*."

"I do not believe Romanoff came to me on her commander's behalf," Thor said. "She was quite insistent on knowing that your... if I understood her correctly, that your *selfhood* was intact."

"Perhaps I was wrong about her anger," Loki said thoughtfully. "It may have been less about you specifically, and more about the nature of what they assumed I'd done to you."

"You think she's got a moral crusade against brainwashing?" Tony said skeptically.

Loki glanced at him, and grimaced slightly. "Not a *moral* crusade, perhaps. But it's likely that the notion of meddling with someone's sense of self... affects her. Assuming that what Barton knew of her had any truth to it."

Well, that was vague. Tony shrugged, not caring all that much. At some point they'd have to figure out whether they were going to lump all SHIELD personnel in the same tainted basket, or go to the trouble of figuring out who was complicit in the worst stuff. Not right now.

"Perhaps," Thor said. "Perhaps she feels loyalty to those she has fought beside. Perhaps she truly only sought information for another. I simply suggest that you not be too hasty in deciding your enemies while I am away--"

Loki made a deeply incredulous noise, folding his arms and staring at Thor.

Thor cleared his throat and said a little defensively, "Yes, alright, but that means I know the folly of it."

Tony snorted quietly to himself, turning his attention back to the schematics. There were so many improvements that could be made, the whole design could be so much more efficient - even if he hadn't read (re-read?) the contract, he'd be able to tell from a glance that SI was responsible for the engines and nothing more.

Would it be overkill to build a flying fortress?

That was the wrong question. Did he *want* to build a flying fortress?

Slowly, Tony started to grin.

--

On Monday, December the second, 2013, approximately three hours after putting a fourth empty cup on his coffee table, Tony Stark held a press conference.

In the gathered crowd, a large number of cameras were set up, on tripods and shoulders and a few handheld; remarkably, only two had set off the detailed scanners embedded in Stark Tower's doors. SHIELD had probably assumed a single back-up was enough.

Tony took the podium, and as the last of the camera operators were hitting their record buttons he smiled quietly to himself at the increasing puzzlement of a man in a bland gray suit whose camera wasn't firing.

So to speak. Or, you know. Literally.

"Thanks for coming, everyone," Tony said into the microphone. "A bit short notice, I know, but I've got pastries coming. For those of you who still have any appetite afterwards."

That got the room's attention in a hurry.

Tony let his face turn serious, and put on an appropriately grave and somber voice as he explained to his audience that something terrible had come to his attention. Something that had been covered up.

At this point the back-up assassin was frowning too, jabbing at the controls of his camera in frustration.

Tony drew it out a little, waxing lyrical about how he hadn't been sure he should come forward, the moral dilemma he'd wrestled with, because it was hilarious watching those two guys desperately try to figure out what to do.

Eventually Pepper rolled her eyes and made a watch-tapping motion at him, so he cut to his segue line: "...although obviously, I expect retribution for coming forward today."

Wide eyes, murmuring in the crowd.

"You know that I went missing on November fourteenth. I have been advised not to make any accusations about where I was held or who I was held by. I can confirm that I was briefly free for a period of hours on Friday and that, again, I have been advised not to make any accusations about being detained in the early hours of Saturday morning." He glanced down at the sheets of paper on the podium to allow the audience a moment to start spinning conspiracy theories in their minds.

"You may recall the attack on New York City last year, which culminated in a missile being launched which was able to be directed through the portal to strike the enemy forces there. What was *not* widely publicized was that that missile was not originally intended for the portal."

One of the assassins shuffled backwards and started jogging towards-- oh, fire alarm, clever. Pity for that guy SI security stepped in.

"Not only was the missile intended to strike Manhattan, a civilian population," Tony said firmly, making sure no one's attention was pulled to the scuffle for long, "in what I can only describe as a completely *boneheaded* attempt to win with no regard for loss of human life - I can also confirm that the missile in question was in fact nuclear."

Uproar.

Loki was leaning against the back wall, more-or-less disguised but smirking like this was the absolute best day of his life. Tony's lips twitched but he managed not to grin, not while the cameras were still rolling. He'd even let Pepper veto the terrific Prada tie with the lipstick pattern all over it.

After about five seconds he figured enough was enough, and rapped the microphone sharply. "Little more to go, folks, if you could simmer down... Thank you. I should remind you all, that missile was launched by a pilot employed by the Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division, or SHIELD. Little bit obscure, google it if you're unfamiliar."

Aaaand assassin number two had just gotten himself pulled out of the crowd for his attempted disruption; nicely done. Tony made a mental note that all the security staff on this press conference should get raises; admittedly the SHIELD agents had been denied functioning weapons but they could still go hand-to-hand and the SI guys were restraining them well.

"Now, as I was saying - it has just recently come to my attention that this nuclear strike was entirely unauthorized. Let me repeat, this was an attempted nuclear strike by U.S. personnel that *was not authorized* by the President. This was an attempted nuclear strike *on U.S. soil*, on a civilian population, an American population."

Wide eyes, outrage, shock; they were eating out of the palm of his hand.

"I except they will try to discredit me," Tony said, with no small sense of irony. "Maybe they'll spin some story about how I'm mentally unstable, or a traitor, or making it up - close-up footage of the missile will be forwarded to all of you, by the way, cameras in the Iron Man suit got some really clear shots while I was diverting it through that portal. Feel free to have it analyzed."

And when SHIELD fielded an expert to say the footage was fake, Tony had a recording of the Director of SHIELD telling him personally that the nuke was coming in.

"But questions need to be asked as to how and why this agency is able to conduct nuclear strikes - without authorization or oversight - or why they even *have* nuclear capabilities to begin with. I mean, I'm sorry, does the CIA have nuclear missiles? Does the Secret Service have nuclear missiles? Rhetorical; they don't. Regardless - at some point in the chain of command, a decision was made that should not have been. Likely more than one."

Another pause to build tension; this time ostensibly to take a sip of water. Tony looked around at his audience, making eye contact here and there. "We know that the President did not authorize the launch of a nuclear missile. What we do not know is whether he was told afterwards that the missile was nuclear, or whether that was deliberately kept from him. We do not know how far up the conspira-- ah, sorry, sorry, I mis-spoke - how far up the *knowledge* goes."

He leaned forward, grasping both sides of the podium to brace himself on it. "You may be wondering why announce this publicly? Why not go through the proper channels? Well, I'm just one man. As we've seen, it's possible for me to... disappear." Meaningful pause. "If something happens to me, something completely accidental of course, I want to be sure there is a proper investigation, that this doesn't somehow... fall through the cracks."

Right, well, that had set things up nicely. And as a bonus, the President should be about ready to throw SHIELD under a bus. Tony smiled brightly. "Any questions?"

Game on.

--

That night, Tony was trying not to contemplate how maladjusted he must be that even his *fangernails* looked weird to him now. To distract himself, he decided to ask about something had been niggling at him since Loki had teleported them out of SHIELD.

He curled towards Loki and cleared his throat slightly. "You said... you wanted to find out if I wanted to stay."

"Yes," Loki said slowly, looking curious.

Tony tugged at Loki's forearm and laced his fingers between Loki's. "But... what do *you* want? You must have had something in mind." An awful thought struck him. "You don't still want to...?"

Loki tilted his head slightly, gaze flickering as he studied Tony's expression. "Ah... to die? No. That pain has eased, my *kläs*. That does not mean I had a firm plan for what I might do were we to return to the proper course of time."

"Nothing?" Tony said dubiously. It was hard to believe Loki was that keen on the idea of settling down on Earth. No, he was only here because Tony was here - and as much as Tony liked it when people just went along with whatever he wanted, he didn't so much like the part where they bottled up resentment about it and then yelled at him.

Loki shrugged a little. "I was already... in something of a state of flux. I know that I will not willingly return to Asgard's prisons, but neither can I simply take up the life I had before I first fell from the Bifrost." He rolled onto his side, facing Tony, and with his free hand clasped the side of Tony's neck. "I'm sure something will come to me. For now, the place I most want to be is wherever you make your home."

"Sappy," Tony said contentedly, leaning into the touch a little. "I like it. Works for me. It's official, we live together-- did you just invite yourself to move in? Smooth moves, Magic Fingers."

Loki smirked slightly, letting go to shift his weight back. "I have my moments."

"That you do." Tony was in an excellent position to lean forward and kiss Loki's shoulder, so he did. Then he did it a few more times, applying a little more teeth and tongue as he worked his way along the collarbone. Loki made an extremely satisfying sound.

Tomorrow, probably, was Tuesday.

#

Chapter End Notes

And that's a wrap!

Due to accidental plot incursions and possessive Asgardians, I wound up using very few of the scene ideas that originally inspired the story. So at some point maybe there'll be a spin-off collection of alternative takes and/or the obvious sequel Tony And Loki Troll Hydra Without Even Trying. Next up I have... too many unfinished fics and not enough hours in the day, so business as usual.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!